

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

MARCH 1998

A DEATH ON THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

"It wasn't until the
next day that I noticed
it," he said, watching
me scrutinize the
bloodstained shirt.

BY DAVID K. HARFORD

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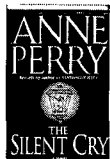
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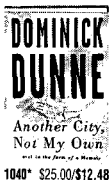
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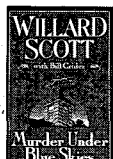
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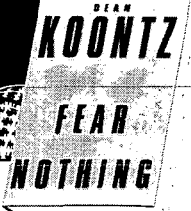
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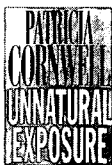
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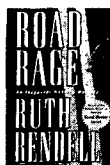
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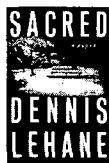
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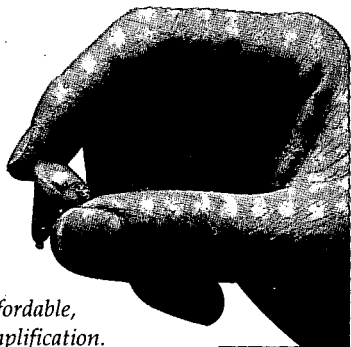
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We've had other uses for this space lately and so haven't been able to introduce some new authors. We hereby hasten to catch up.

Sharon Cook, author of "Blue-fish Weather," her first piece of fiction (December), lives in Massachusetts, writes and does editorial cartoons for the local papers, and teaches composition. She has been an occupational therapist and a stand-up comic and has a line of greeting cards.

Sherrie Brown, co-author of "November Nights," with Gene KoKayKo (also in the December issue) is a Californian, one of seven sisters, author of sixty-plus short stories (this was her first mystery) in magazines like *Galaxy* and *Tomorrow*, and works in a collectibles shop.

Antigone Barton, author of "More People Like Me" (January) and editor of a community

newspaper, is a New Yorker living in Florida. She's written feature articles for magazines and newspapers; this is her first story. Among other things she has substitute-taught in New York, bartended in Key West, and produced training videos.

In this issue, James Lincoln Warren, author of "The Dioscuri Deception," is a Texan transplanted to California, a book-seller, and a Naval Reserve commander. "As a naval officer in the '80's I traveled north of the Arctic Circle twice, navigated the first U.S. warship to visit the People's Republic of China on a diplomatic port of call . . . and once circumnavigated the earth—San Diego to Bahrain by ship, Bahrain to San Diego via airplane." His first story, a Rabelaisian fantasy, was published in *Fantastic Stories*. This is his second.

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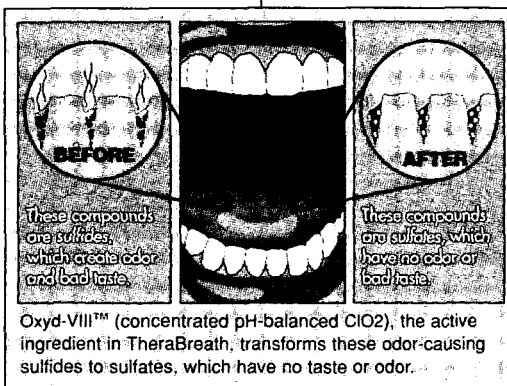
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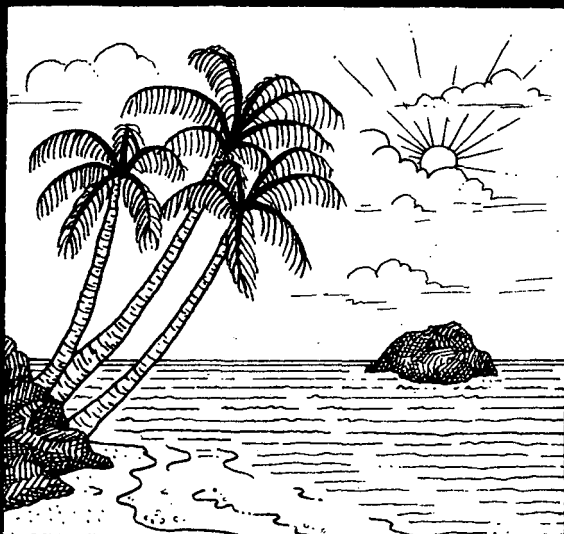


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No, Thank You, John

Michelle
Knowlden

*I'd rather answer "No" to fifty
Johns*

Than answer "Yes" to you.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
"No, Thank You, John"

Sugar-fine sand stretched to the left for several hundred feet till it disappeared around a gentle bend of leaning coconut trees and feathery Pa'iniu bushes. To the right the beach abruptly ended at a rocky headland. A volcanic slab jutted through the water a half mile from shore. Near us, warm waves lapped at a small weathered boat.

Centuries ago the ancient Hawaiians came on pilgrimages to this coast and swam around the boulder in the sea, a thanksgiving journey for those cured of a killing sickness. The rocks all around us had stick figures or petroglyphs carved into them—turtles and fish and triangular men, all white scratches in the black stone.

The dawn sky bled upward on an already sultry morning. The sand crunched beneath me as I stretched out on a hotel towel in my pink cotton pajamas. With an alphabetical immune deficiency, wearing street clothes was a fruitless endeavor. My lawyer friend Jack McGraff tinkered with a laptop and mobile phone. He rocked slightly to his right so that the flat plane satel-

lite antenna on the lid of the computer pointed east. His curly hair and Celtic skin gleamed as ruddy as the dawn sky. In the bag next to me were *malasadas*—a sugary Portuguese doughnut—a thermos of coffee, fresh papaya, and medication for dysentery of the amoebas kind.

At this time of year mornings in Wisconsin would be chilly and the leaves metastasizing in hues of yellow and red. I would be in my pink flannels in my sickroom upstairs, suffering not from tropical dysentery but from Dressler's syndrome or dum dum fever. Or maybe even jump into an ebola virus although I hadn't researched symptoms as far as the E's in *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia*.

Jack's laptop gave a chirrup. Eyeing my *malasadas* from a rock nearby, a seagull answered with a melancholy cry.

In Wisconsin I would also be trying to avoid murder cases (or work of any sort) at the LaMare and Cardex Detective Agency—a difficult thing to do with an Aunt Helena who enjoys violence and injustice of all sorts. She administered my portion of the Cardex trust with stinging reprisals if the conditions for gainful employment were not met.

Helena and her secretary had followed me to Hawaii to make sure I didn't slip into malingering.

ing ways. Because she hated to miss anything, my cousin Robyn had joined us, too.

"We're on line," Jack said. He was a marvelous lawyer, but he loved gadgets more than briefs. "Got the latest from Bob, Micky. It's not good news."

Two things had brought me to the Big Island of Hawaii. One was Jack McGraff. We'd been working one of Wildemark's biggest murder cases ten months ago when his doctors discovered that his fatigue and headaches came not from the hopelessness of his client's defense but from leukemia. He passed the murder case on to his partner, Bob Ross, who'd promptly fired me. (Bob had always thought my ill health a sham.)

Jack's regimen of chemotherapy proved successful, and when his doctors gave him the good news, he decided to go to Puakomalū Bay just north of Kailua-Kona on a pilgrimage for a fellow leukemia patient who had died a few weeks ago, a large man named Keoni whose cancer proved even bigger than he.

I was also in Hawaii for a second reason: I was on vacation.

Jack's broad chin jutted closer to the computer screen. "Second day of the trial and the media's already passed down a verdict of guilty," he growled. "Bob is still two days away from beginning

his defense." He pressed the scroll-down key.

I glanced back at our bougainvillea-clad hotel—Old Mother's on the Kona Coast. Aunt Helena's room was still dark, as was Gregory's room next to hers. Gregory, Helena's secretary and unpublished-poet protégé, believed in the art of sleeping in almost as much as in coffee-house readings and buffet line eating. I looked up to see my cousin Robyn galloping around the hotel's rooftop track, her white-blond hair floating like a flag behind her. She'd left our room long before me. Even after ten years of assisting me on murder investigations while working on her interminable doctoral thesis on linguistic oddities in Victorian literature, her physical and mental disciplines remained untarnished.

"He didn't do it." I looked over to see Jack giving me a fierce look. "I never believed that kid killed his mother," he said.

I thought about that skinny, wispy-haired "kid," who looked much younger than his twenty-seven years. "Neither did I," I agreed mildly. "When are you going to swim around the rock? In another half hour it'll be too hot to pace you with the rowboat."

"Bob won't get him off. He thinks Ian Baker did kill his mother."

"Uh-huh." I squinted at the fine print on a bismuth iodide prescription bottle, then took a swig. "Don't forget we need to return the boat before nine."

"No one else was in the house that night. If Ian hadn't mentioned her dying so soon after eating dinner, no one would've suspected it was anything but a heart attack."

"Murder happens more often than you'd think," I said.

"He was stuck caring for a sick, angry old woman. Except for a small bequest for her nurse and a slightly larger one for his older brother, Ian inherited all her money. He told scores of people that if he was free of her he'd return to grad school."

My stomach rumbled in protest, and I frowned irritably at him. "Hey, Jack—I thought you wanted to follow that old Hawaiian ritual of swimming off the Kona coast after a healing. That pilgrimage Keoni wanted to do when he got well."

"Yeah. That's why we're here." He stared sightlessly over the flat blue water. "It couldn't have been the brother; he was in New York at the time. The nurse was at a party with friends. Besides, she had no motive."

"You can't make the journey all at once," I reminded him. "To do the whole thing in four days, you've got to do a quarter mile now."

Jack yanked the phone cord out of the laptop and slammed it shut. "You know Bob has no imagination. That kid's never going to see grad school again."

I didn't say anything. I rolled up the legs on my pink pajamas, picked up the boat tether, and splashed out to sea dragging the skiff behind me. My stomach surged in time with the surf. The rope wore at my hands.

"What do you think, Micky?" I heard Jack shout above the mewling cries of the seagulls and the waves breaking on me. He slowly waded into the water till it reached his ribs. "If Ian Baker didn't kill his mother, who did?"

I scrambled into the boat and weakly dug my oar in, heading towards the boulder in the sea. "Come on, Jack," I yelled. "Start swimming now."

He stood fast upon the shore. "You spent a couple of days investigating the case," he roared. "Who killed Vi Baker?"

I pulled at the oars again and a bottle of tetracycline fell out of my pocket.

"How should I know?" I shouted back. "I'm on vacation."

A fax was waiting for me when I returned to the hotel. The results of my serologic test. It was negative. A medical doctor without imagination might have

interpreted that to mean I didn't have dysentery. I knew without a particle of doubt, however, that not only did I have an acute case of dysentery, but now my liver had abscessed as well. I thought it'd gone tender while I waited in the boat for Jack to make his circuit. I could feel it enlarging as I stood there in the hotel lobby.

I asked the desk clerk, the one with inkstains on his wrist and a professional smile, to schedule a radioisotopic scanning at the local hospital. The other desk clerk looked up, scratched his great mop of gray hair, then returned to sorting keys in a drawer. I staggered to the elevator. The inkstained clerk, wearing a name tag engraved CLIVE, stared after me with a mystified look on his face.

My room smelled of luggage and leather and gardenia soap. There was no sign of Robyn, who'd undoubtedly begun her serious tourist's duty. Maybe a macadamia nut farm. Perhaps a volcano. I hoped she'd taken Aunt Helena and Gregory with her.

I shucked off my salt-stained pajamas and took a long shower. I eased back into bed and tasted the fresh sea breeze from the open window and smelled plumeria and pikake from the gardens below. Despite an abscessing liver and shoulders aching

from unaccustomed exercise, I drifted off to sleep.

Moments later someone frantically knocked on the door. Sighing, I pulled a robe around me and answered it.

"Miss Cardex?" A young woman stared at me through a mane of soft brown hair. She swept it away with a nervous hand and gave me a pleading look. She was dressed in a maid's uniform. Her name tag said JILL.

"I am Micky Cardex." I leaned on the door frame.

"The detective?"

"Yes," I said warily. "But I'm on vacation."

"But you have to help me." She looked fearfully over her shoulder. "Please, may I come in? I think someone's trying to kill me."

I pulled her in and shut the door. I wasn't going to take the case, but I didn't want her murdered on my doorstep.

"I told Sean you'd help us. Sean Kristoffer's my boyfriend. He's the hotel manager here. We're going to get married." Unstrung and artless, her words tumbled out.

"Congratulations," I murmured and crawled back into bed. She perched on a chair near me.

"I got this letter a few hours ago," she said, taking a crumpled note from her pocket. She

smoothed it out and handed it to me.

I've often thought about writing a monograph on "How to Effectively Send a Threatening Letter and Not Get Caught." A dozen clues about even the most careful tormentor can be garnered from one sheet of paper.

The letter was written on hotel stationery; therefore, the author had access to it either as a guest or employee, or from such a person. The penmanship was badly mangled, with words wandering off the ruled lines. The paper was ink-smeared, and whole phrases were blotted out. Interestingly enough, I could see under the heavy, single-line scoring that the "mistakes" were redone not because of misspellings but because the writing had grown too crooked to be deciphered.

Jill—

I can no longer be silent. I watch and wait for you, but you give me nothing. You give me no smiles or greetings or warmth. It is like I don't exist. You are cold like an iceberg. Cold like a grave.

I see you give your smiles and your warmth to Kristoffer. I see you are no different than other pretty women with frozen hearts. I hear you call him your honey bird. You cannot be his. Even if you are not mine.

You tell him to leave you

alone. Or the honey bird will die. You know the truth of that.

A series of crude stick figures similar to the petroglyphs I had seen at the beach this morning was drawn at the bottom of the letter. A bird, a spear, and a triangular man lying on his side.

I glanced up to see Jill watching me anxiously. She swallowed and shook hair out of her eyes. "What do you think?" she said.

I wanted to hand the letter back to her. I wanted to ask her to leave. But in the words of this letter and in the angry blots, a dangerous man was stalking her.

"Have you called the police?" I asked.

She exhaled in a great whoosh of air. "So I really am in danger?"

"I don't think you're in danger," I said. "But honey bird—your boyfriend—is."

"I told my brother. He's a cop. He says it's one of my friends playing a joke on me. Some of my friends have a weird sense of humor, but not *this* weird."

"What does this mean at the end—that you will know the truth about the honey bird dying?"

Jill's pale face grew even paler. "Yesterday, before I got this letter, I found a dead honey-creeper bird on my doorstep.

One of those pretty red ones? I thought a cat had killed it." She bit her lip. "Miss Cardex, it was horrible. The poor thing was really torn up."

"How did you get the letter?" I gulped down some bismuth. My stomach flipped over and settled.

"It was on my cart this morning. I showed it to Sean, but he also says it's just a joke. I can't stop thinking about it. It's too creepy, with the dead bird and all."

"Is your cart locked up at night?"

She nodded vigorously.

"Everyone around here has a key to the back room. But none of my friends work here, so how could they put a letter in my cart?"

"Have you had problems with anyone who works here at the hotel? Has anyone been following you? Have you seen anyone here watching you?" At each one of my questions, she shook her head uncertainly.

"I've worked here about seven months, and everyone's been okay. Except for my boyfriend, I don't mix much with the hotel people. I've met some of the guys in the front office because of Sean. There are gardeners and groundsmen and maintenance people and kitchen workers and security, but I don't even know their names."

You give me no smiles or greetings or warmth. It is like I don't exist.

His words echoed in my thoughts, and I shivered.

Opening the nightstand drawer, I extracted a notepad and pen. After scribbling a few words I held it and the threatening letter out to her. She took them from me gingerly.

"Give these to the man in Room 289," I told her; "his name is John McGraff—he's a lawyer. He'll go with you to see the police. Tell them about the dead bird, too."

I rose painfully and walked her to the door. "But Miss Cardex," she faltered, "aren't you going to help me? Sean says you always solve your cases."

"Sean's right," I said, "but this is a police matter. Mr. McGraff will take care of you." I closed the door on her and returned to bed.

"Besides," I said to the empty room. "I'm on vacation."

Robyn burst into our room twenty minutes later, thrust a Hawaiian shirt and shorts at me, and dragged me down to brunch on the terrace. She chattered about all they'd seen: waterfalls, lava flows, and Saint Benedict's at Honaunau, an old painted church. She herded me so quickly through the buffet line that I only had time to

snatch some pickled fish and pineapple chunks and a small glass of guava juice.

We joined Aunt Helena and Gregory, already seated with a man in a well-pressed jogging suit and a woman wearing a tiny tennis outfit and a heavy gold necklace. A thorny sapling and a crown flower tree shaded the table. Aunt Helena's plate held a banana, a bit of rice, and a sliver of boiled chicken. Dis-course was meat to her, and she was going full throttle with Gregory and the two strangers. The woman's thin, plucked eyebrows fairly danced with Helena's pronouncements, but Gregory's attention centered on his plate heaped high with slabs of roasted pork, lingüesa sausage, salads, and lichee nut cakes. Sweat percolated on his brow as the day grew hotter. His poet attire of black silk shirt and gabardine wool pants didn't suit Paradise.

"Michaela," Helena growled when she saw me. "I see you've finally gotten out of bed. Perhaps you may even surprise us and do something today."

"I doubt it," I said pathetically. "I'm not feeling well." I weakly sipped my juice.

Helena snorted. The lavender ribbons on her sun hat bobbed energetically.

"Oooh," the young woman

squealed. "Are you Micky Cardex?"

"Yes," I said. "Please pass the mango chutney."

"Baby," she said to the older man. "She's *the* Micky Cardex. You know—the detective who solved the Rostanovich case out in California."

"Oh?" He glanced up from his book; his mustache twitched; then he returned to his book. Robyn made a face at me.

"Wow," said the young woman, twirling her heavy gold chain. "Unless you count the cowboy who does that laundry soap commercial, I've never met anyone as famous as you. May I have your autograph?"

"Best not," I advised. "I have dysentery. You get it by touch, you know."

"My name's Juanita Jackson, but call me Nita—everyone does." She fluffed at her mass of bottle-bleached hair. "This is my boyfriend Arthur Bloom. Arty, say hi to Miss Cardex." He lifted a hand without looking up from his book, then let it drop to the table. He was wearing a wedding ring.

"You here on some big case?" she asked. "Did someone get murdered?"

"Not yet," Robyn said darkly.

"Nonsense," Helena rumbled. "Nothing happens in the tropics. Too much humidity for murder."

"Oh," Nita pouted, "I'd like to see a murder."

"What *have* you seen on the island?" Helena asked. "I hope you've planned a comprehensive tour."

"Oh yes," she said, arching a thin eyebrow. "Arty's ever so good at planning. Yesterday we went to that Parker Ranch. Massive amounts of cows and grass and fences. We saw rock drawings today. I did a tracing." She pulled a much-folded scrap of paper out of a purse the size of a lipstick. Arty must be carrying the checkbook.

"You traced over *petroglyphs*?" Robyn looked at her sternly. "You shouldn't have done that. It damages them."

"Oh, pish," she said. "I didn't hurt them a bit. Do you know what they mean?" she asked me.

"No," I said.

I had a sudden thought and pulled a pen out of Gregory's pocket. I circled a bird, a spear, and a triangular man and gave the paper to Robyn. "Why don't you ask someone at the desk what it means for Nita?"

"Why don't you?" she countered.

"I'm on vacation," I said.

"I'll go with you," Arthur said, suddenly rising from his book. "I need to see the desk clerk myself."

Robyn rolled her eyes at me, swept up her shoulder bag, and

left, with Arthur trying to keep up with her jogging pace.

Nita leaned over her salad plate and whispered, "Arty and I are getting married."

"Marriage is an excellent institution," Helena boomed. "I heartily recommend it for those of good character. I've lost hope for Michaela."

"Won't his current wife crimp your marriage?" I washed a couple of clefamides down with the last of the guava juice, then nibbled a bit of pineapple. With dysentery, I tried to eat whenever my bowels were quiescent.

She stared at me. "You are a great detective. Oh—you saw his wedding ring, right? Well, on the plane over here I told him enough is enough. After all, I've been seeing him for six years now, and he has a zillion reasons why he can't divorce her. He says he'll lose his job 'cause his wife owns the printing company. The house is in her name. If it's not the money, it's her migraines. She gets one every time he talks about leaving her. And so on and so on."

"He doesn't sound like a man of character," Helena sniffed. Her lavender ribbons jiggled indignantly.

"But now?" I prompted her.

"Now he says he has a plan," she simpered. "Arty is good with plans."

"A man who's dilly-dallied for

six years is not likely to get to the sticking point in a hurry," Helena said. "Look at Michaela. If I didn't find her cases and direct her investigations, she'd malingering for months."

"Arty's not like that," she protested. "He loves me lots better than his wife. Like he got me this real gold necklace yesterday, and all he got her was a bottle of aspirin."

"Aspirin of the capsule sort?" I asked.

"How'd you know that? You *are* clever! Arty'll work it out, you'll see. But it's sure hard to wait."

"It must be murder," I said.

"You got it," she said with a gusty sigh.

Robyn and Arthur wound their way back to our table among ginger flower plants and naupaka shrubs. Squawking loudly, a half dozen noddy birds and a lone honeycreeper flew out of the crown flower tree. Robyn handed me a book on petroglyphs. "No one knew what the figures meant. Kimo Kaulei-namoku told me to try the gift shop, and I found this."

"Wow," I said admiringly. "You're getting good with the local names. Didn't the other desk clerk know anything either—Clive Somebody?"

"Clive Sadler. Nope, he wouldn't even help me. In fact, when he saw the stick figures you'd

circled, he turned red and got huffy." Unmindful of contracting dysentery, she snagged my last bit of pineapple.

I passed the book and tracing to Nita. "Maybe this will help."

"By the way, Micky," Robyn said, "did you know John McGraff is in the manager's office talking to a policeman?"

"Ah? The hotel probably lost a fax, and he overreacted. You know lawyers." I casually swept the bottle of cefamides into my pocket and stood up. "I'll check it out."

"Michaela," Helena said firmly, "if you won't join us for the afternoon tour of the Hulihee Palace, do *something* useful. I'll leave a list at the desk."

"Sure, Aunt Helena. I'll get right on it." I started to leave, then snapped my fingers. "Arthur, our agency may be interested in switching printing services. If I could have your card, perhaps we'll talk after our holiday."

He quickly proffered his company card framed in filigree, and Nita gave me a pleased smile. "Call him any time," she said. "He'll be glad to get involved in your murder business."

"And I look forward to being involved in his," I said.

The hotel manager's secretary was away from his office, and the two desk clerks, Clive and

Kimo, never looked up when I slipped through Sean Kristoffer's door.

Jill sat on a chair near an atrium window. She was gray with exhaustion. With his computer connected to Kristoffer's phone, Jack was checking his e-mail and glancing up periodically to monitor the conversation between Kristoffer and the policeman. By his stance and Jill's defeated stare, I could see her boyfriend still didn't believe that the letter meant imminent peril.

"The bird was killed by a cat," Kristoffer insisted. "And the letter's just a joke. If one of Jill's friends didn't leave it, then it was one of mine. I have several who would pull something like this."

"If you'll give me their names, I can check it out," the police officer said. "We'd like to treat this seriously until we find out otherwise."

Kristoffer threw Jill a frustrated look, which she stubbornly ignored.

"See here," he stalled. "I don't want to get anyone in trouble over something like this."

"Excuse me," I said. "Perhaps I could help narrow the search a bit?"

"This is the Micky Cardex I was telling you about," Jack told the officer. "Jill went to her first."

I patted Jill on the shoulder.

She had cheered up on seeing me. "I suggest questioning Clive Sadler first. I think he might be the one you want."

"Clive? You can't be serious," Kristoffer said incredulously. "He's one of my best employees."

"Who's Clive?" Jill asked.

"One of the desk clerks," I said. Since she still looked confused, I added: "The younger one."

"Why do you think it's him?" the police officer asked, his hand poised over his notepad.

"Since Jill had to pass him to get to Mr. Kristoffer's office, he saw her on a regular basis. He had access to the laundry room keys, therefore to her cart where the note was planted. Although he's right-handed, this morning his left wrist was ink-stained. The writing in the note was smeared and the letters rough. It's common to write with the opposite hand when someone's trying to disguise his handwriting."

"Well done, Miss Cardex," Jill said and clapped her hands. Kristoffer sat down abruptly, his face ashen.

"Also," I said, "when my cousin Robyn showed him the three petroglyphs from the letter on a different piece of paper, he became agitated."

"My God," Kristoffer exhaled. "One of our groundsmen report-

ed rat poison missing from the storage shed yesterday. Was he going to use that to kill me?"

"No, that's for someone else," I said. "After hearing about the bird and seeing the petroglyph spear, I suspect Clive prefers a more direct approach."

The officer pocketed his pad. "Where can I find Mr. Sadler?"

"This way, sir," Kristoffer said grimly. "Allow me to introduce you to him." They trooped out through the secretarial suite with Jill following close behind her boyfriend.

"Nice job," Jack said, his eyes glued to his computer screen. "But I don't get his motive. Just because she never noticed him doesn't seem like a reason to kill the boyfriend."

I shrugged. "It reminded me of 'No, Thank You, John.'"

He turned around and gave me a puzzled look. "No, thank you, for what?"

"It's a poem by Christina Rossetti. In it she tells John that if he thinks she has no heart he's mad to be offended. She can't give what she doesn't have."

He went back to his computer. "It'll never work as a defense—insanity by reason of poetry."

I laughed. "Don't tell Gregory that. He thinks truth is found only in verse and it's psychiatry that's bunk."

"How about some poetry for

my case? The prosecutor's just called his last witness. He's done a good job of painting Ian Baker as a killer. I doubt Bob can change that."

I opened my mouth, but he waved a hand without looking around.

"Yeah, I know. You don't have to say it again."

"Just a minute, Jack. I was following a lead on the nurse before I was taken off the Baker case. I gave Bob the information—do you know whether he did anything with it?"

"I don't know. What was the lead?"

I sat down in Kristoffer's plushy chair and tried to reconstruct a report from ten months ago. "Her two previous in-house patients also died from heart failure. Which could have meant they'd ingested foxglove as Vi Baker did."

"You've forgotten two things, Micky. First, she had no motive. Second, she had the night off. Ian fixed the meal."

"Ian heated up leftovers that anyone could have doctored. Including the brother who'd flown to New York the night before. She gambled that Ian wouldn't eat them, too, but if I remember correctly, he's a vegetarian. Vi Baker's last meal was beef stew."

Jack frowned and tapped his broad chin. "And motive?"

I shrugged. "Not sure. But it reminded me a little of that case in Boston a few years back. Remember the nurse who killed elderly patients? She thought it an act of kindness for the family members burdened with them."

Jack swiveled in his chair and started typing. "I'll tell Bob to get someone on it."

"You might tell Bob to see if the nurse was something of a gardener. It would be interesting to know where she got the foxglove." I stood up. The sun was high, and near the hotel pool a kukui nut tree was shading a lounge chair destined for me. Then I turned back.

"Do me a favor, Jack? A Mr. Arthur Bloom is staying here at

the hotel with his girlfriend. When he returns to Nebraska, he's planning to give his wife a bottle of aspirin laced with rat poison. Would you alert the authorities there for me? Here's his business card."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Sure," he said glancing at the card. "I went to school with an assistant D.A. there. He'll get the word to the right people." He gave me an assessing look, then grinned. "Since you're on a roll, I've got a couple more cases we could start working on. Hold on and I'll give you the briefs."

"No, thank you, John McGraff," I said, shaking my head emphatically.

"I'm on vacation."

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FICTION

PACK RATS

Malcolm McClintick



Illustration by Friedrich Haas

19

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/98

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Harcourt thought for a moment, his ballpoint poised over the lined notepaper, then wrote:

Dear Anna,

By the time you get this, it should be all over. Don't forget—don't try to contact me in any way for at least two weeks. We can't be seen together, or connected in any way, until it's safe.

I must be crazy to agree to this, but you know I'm crazy about you.

In two weeks or so, I will call you and

Harcourt gave up in disgust. The letter was just no good. Speaking of crazy, it was probably nuts even to send Anna a letter. Suppose she was one of those people who was friendly with her mail carrier, chatted every day, and the carrier noticed the return address. He wouldn't put a return address on it. Even so, something could go wrong. Sometimes Harcourt got other people's mail by mistake. Suppose his letter was delivered to the wrong address? Anything could happen.

No, far better just to give her a call from a pay phone someplace. Why risk a letter at all?

He wadded the sheet of paper into a ball and tossed it in his trash can. His nerves were shot. The whole thing had been an or-

deal. He still couldn't believe they were risking imprisonment or even death.

By now the police would have found the body. Probably Anna would have been notified. Harcourt could picture the cop knocking on Anna's door, grim-faced. "Mrs. Karl Gersting? I'm sorry, ma'am, but your husband's been shot."

He began to tremble. He knew it was simply an after-the-fact nervous reaction, but knowing it didn't help.

To do something, some kind of physical activity, Harcourt got up and began moving around, emptying trash cans into a paper grocery sack, straightening the apartment, making a bundle of magazines. He threw away the green glass ashtray he'd been meaning to discard because one corner was chipped.

He felt terrible. A litany of "what if" questions battered his head. What if the police traced the bullets? What if they found the gun shop and traced the gun? What if Anna broke down and confessed the whole thing, agreed to testify against him? What if . . .

Harcourt went to the fridge and popped a can of cold beer, took several long swallows. Got to stay calm, he thought. Can't fall apart now.

It was almost dark. He tied the bundle of magazines with

heavy twine and carried them and the grocery sack out of his apartment and down to the little room at the end of the hall. There was no incinerator. Once a week a garbage man came, opened the room's outer door, and threw everything into the truck. Harcourt set the paper bag and bundle of magazines next to a sack of empty bottles and hurried back to his apartment.

As he entered, his phone was ringing, and he knew it was the police wanting to interrogate him. But it was only some kind of sales call. Harcourt snapped, "Not interested," slammed down the receiver, and went to the kitchen to finish his beer, still shaking all over.

Three apartments down on the opposite side of the hall, a door that had been ajar eased closed again, and a thin elderly woman named Cora Purjinsky turned to regard her slightly older sister.

"Louise. Somebody just went down to the trash room."

Louise sat in the big easy chair, one gnarled hand gripping the knob of a cane, her other hand holding a cigarette, peering through thick-lensed glasses. Actually, both women wore glasses, but Louise's were much thicker than Cora's. Aside from the glasses, Louise had cataracts which, so far, she re-

fused to see a doctor about, so her vision steadily deteriorated. She wouldn't admit it, though.

"Who was it?" Louise rasped. Her voice was low and gritty from a lifetime of chainsmoking.

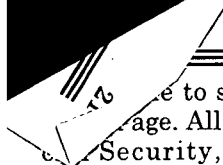
"That man from apartment G," Cora replied, picking up the small wicker basket she always used for carrying back whatever she found. "Let's go see what he took out. Sometimes he's got interesting magazines. And there was that screwdriver last week. Come on, Louise."

"I'm coming already." Louise said, struggling up from the easy chair.

Leaning heavily on her cane, she followed Cora to the door. Cora opened it, glanced up and down the hall, and motioned for her sister to follow.

Cora felt no guilt about using what other people threw away. She wasn't stealing. It was trash. Nobody cared what happened to their trash once it was gone. The only thing she felt funny about was having people see them going through the trash containers, having them know she and her sister were poor enough that they had to rely on other people's discarded items to supplement their livelihood.

Her sister Louise had never married, so she had no dead husband's life insurance policy



...to see her through
age. All she had was So-
Security, which seemed
smaller and smaller every year.
Cora had been married long ago,
but her husband had been a
drunk and a spendthrift who
had drowned on a fishing trip
without leaving her a dime. In
fact, Cora had been forced to sell
the house to pay his debts.

For years now, she and Lou-
ise had lived in this small
apartment, living out their
meager lives with the bare min-
imum, scraping by, eating
canned food, pinching their
pennies, mending holes in
threadbare dresses, and scav-
enging from the trash.

They went down the hall and
entered the trash room. It was
amazing what people threw out.
Last week Cora had found a pair
of tennis shoes that fit comfort-
ably. The soles were shot, but
they were perfect for sitting at
home in, watching TV or drink-
ing tea, and they were warm.
Just yesterday Louise had re-
cued a rusty pair of scissors that,
once cleaned and sharpened,
served well for sewing and re-
pairs.

Anything might be of use. A
length of string. Sheets of blank
writing paper. An envelope with
an uncanceled postage stamp. A
drinking glass, cracked on one
side but still usable. An old coat.
Coupons for money off on every-

thing from groceries to movie
tickets.

Cora and Louise had gone to
see an Arnold Schwarzenegger
film last week, the first time
they'd been in a movie theater
in three years, for only the price
of some popcorn and a Coke.
Sometimes there was even a bit
of food.

"See anything good?" Louise
asked, leaning on her cane and
peering here and there through
her thick glasses.

Cora quickly surveyed the
room. The man in apartment G
was a bachelor, and usually his
trash consisted of TV dinner
cartons, beer cans, and an occa-
sional copy of a men's magazine
that neither Cora nor Louise
had the courage to actually
open, the girls on the front cover
being terrible enough. But
sometimes there was something
useful.

"That's his grocery sack," Co-
ra said, pointing at the brown
paper bag. "That's the kind he
always uses, with the two paper
handles. Looks like more beer
cans." She began rummaging
through it while her sister wait-
ed patiently, both hands on the
knob of her cane.

"See any matches?" Louise
asked in her gritty voice.

"No. But here's an ashtray.
Broken on one corner, but you
could still use it." She held up

the green glass ashtray for her sister to see.

"Take it," Louise said. "Any clean paper? Grab any clean paper you see. I like to make notes when I'm working the crossword."

"There's some paper all wadded into a ball," Cora said. She picked it out of the bag, examined it. You had to be careful. Sometimes there were nasty things in wads of paper. Rotten fruit or vegetables. Squashed bugs. Once she'd even found a dead mouse.

"Well?" Louise rasped, leaning on her cane.

"It's a clean sheet of notepaper," Cora told her. "He started to write something on one side, a letter or something. But the rest of it's blank, and the whole other side is blank."

She shoved the wrinkled sheet of paper into her wicker basket.

Louise nodded. "Look for a *TV Guide*."

Harcourt finished his beer, popped a second, and sank down on the sofa in front of the TV. Watching the local news, he began having even more paranoid thoughts.

It occurred to him, suddenly, that the letter he'd started to Anna could be incriminating. He tried desperately to recall what he'd said in it. Something about not contacting him for two

weeks till it was safe or clear or something like that. Had he mentioned her husband at all? Had he signed his name? No, he'd given up before the end, and all it said was "Dear Anna."

Muting the TV because it was interfering with his thoughts, he closed his eyes and tried to picture the letter. If all it said was "Dear Anna" and some junk about not contacting him, with no other name, then how could anybody connect it to him or to the murder of Anna's husband? Besides, who the hell would see it? It was safely in the trash. Tomorrow was trash day. By ten o'clock tomorrow morning, the garbage men would be loading everything in the room into one of those huge trucks.

Still . . .

Harcourt decided to retrieve the letter and maybe rip it into little pieces. Flush it down the john. Or burn it on his stove. Or at least not throw it away till tomorrow morning.

That's the ultimate in paranoia, he thought bitterly. Here he was, worried that some unknown person would find an unfinished note in the trash and make something of it.

He opened his eyes and saw police on the TV screen. He turned up the sound. My God, he thought. It was Anna's husband. Already found.

Police had been summoned to a Near Northside bar a couple of hours ago by someone who had heard gunshots. In a dumpster in the alley behind the bar, the officers had found the body of a man identified as Karl Gersting, a local attorney. Gersting had been shot several times in the chest and head and was pronounced dead at the scene. His wife Anna had been notified. Police had no motive and no suspects in the shooting.

Shaken, Harcourt turned the TV off and sat chewing his lip. In a way none of it had seemed real till he'd seen it on the news. For the first time he realized the enormity of what had happened. He began to shake.

My God, he thought.

The discarded letter to Anna took on a new urgency.

Quickly Harcourt got up and went to the door. He opened it an inch, peered out. Two people were in the hall. He shut it again and waited.

It was those two little old ladies from apartment E. The Purjinsky sisters. The pack rats, as he thought of them. They were odd, weird, maybe even crazy. He'd heard about mental patients who lived among normal people, out of institutions. Ambulatory schizophrenics or something like that. They were only a little crazy. Acted in bizarre ways but could survive on

their own, take care of themselves. Maybe that's what the pack rats were.

Or maybe they were just a couple of eccentric old ladies.

Harcourt had spotted them numerous times going through the trash at the end of the hall. Evidently they made a habit of it and actually took things other tenants tossed out. Living on the edge, apparently. Or just weird.

He waited. If he was going to retrieve that unfinished letter, he didn't want anyone seeing him. Not even the pack rats.

Harcourt gave it half a minute by the sweep second hand on his Seiko, then peered into the hallway again. This time it was clear, and he darted out and down the hall. Nobody in the trash room, either. Good. He found his grocery bag, started to dump it out, changed his mind, and carried the bag back to his apartment. It was a grocery bag, after all. Anyone seeing him would think he'd been to the store.

In his kitchen he dumped the bag's contents onto the floor and dug around, looking for the wadded-up ball of lined notepaper on which he'd begun his letter to Anna.

It wasn't there.

Frantically he went through everything in the bag. Empty beer cans. A banana peel. Some

empty Eckrich bologna packages. A couple of boxes that had contained frozen dinners. No wadded-up sheet of paper.

Suddenly he realized something else was missing, too. The broken ashtray he'd thrown out.

And then it hit him.

The pack rats.

The Purjinsky sisters.

Those two old ladies. He'd seen them in the hall. They'd already gone down and sifted through his trash. They'd taken his ashtray.

And his letter to Anna.

In her kitchen, Cora Purjinsky put the teakettle on the stove, then went to the living room and sat down in front of the TV while she waited for it to whistle. In her easy chair Louise had unwadded the sheet of lined notepaper and was starting on a crossword puzzle, using the notepaper to write down parts of words. She lit another cigarette and, without looking up, asked in her gravelly voice, "What's a six-letter word for *menace*?"

"I don't know," Cora said. She hated crosswords. "I can't do those things. Look at this." She turned up the sound on the TV.

"Look at what?"

"This thing on the news. Some man got murdered, his wife's name is Anna. Didn't we have a cousin named Anna something or other, lived out in Nevada or

Nebraska or one of them places?"

"I don't know." Louise puffed on her cigarette.

Cora watched the TV screen. After a moment she heard Louise say, "Anna? Is that what you said? Anna?"

"Yes," Cora said. "How about *evil*?"

"Huh?"

"For *menace*."

"No, no. Has to be six letters. *Evil* is only four. Anyhow, you said some woman named Anna, her husband got murdered?"

"Uh-huh." Cora was already paying attention to the next news item, the murder forgotten. Something about local politics, which she didn't understand. She muted the sound and frowned at her sister. "What about Anna's husband being murdered? Anna who? Somebody we know?"

"No, no," Louise rasped. She peered up through her thick glasses. "This notepaper we found in that man's trash. The one I'm working the crossword on. He wrote something on it, some kind of letter."

"So?" Cora frowned harder. Louise was always making something out of nothing. "Some kind of letter? So what?"

"So shut up and listen," Louise told her, gesturing rapidly with her cigarette so the smoke swirled this way and that

around her wrinkled face. She smoothed her other hand over the sheet of paper and read the words in a loud gritty voice, then looked up at Cora again. "See?"

Cora was beginning to see. "The man in apartment G wrote that? 'Don't try to contact me . . . we can't be seen together until it's safe . . . I'm crazy about you,' and it's to somebody named Anna?"

"Yes." Louise nodded emphatically. "And Anna's the wife of the man who got murdered on the TV news."

Cora stared at her sister for a moment, trying to digest the implications of this. Louise had always been the more imaginative of the two. Even as a child Louise had made up stories, imagined all kinds of wild things, talked about seeing ghosts in the attic. But she wasn't stupid.

Cora thought about it. A strange, tingly feeling spread over her thin, frail body.

"You think the man in apartment G was writing a letter to this Anna whose husband just got murdered? Having some kind of affair with her?"

"'Don't try to contact me,' " Louise said, reciting the words from the letter again. "'Crazy about you. Can't be seen or connected till it's safe.' You hear how it starts out? Listen—" Louise frowned down at the sheet of

paper. "It says, 'By the time you get this, it should be all over.' Her pale watery eyes blinked rapidly behind the thick lenses. "All over, Cora. A four-letter word for *all over*."

"Dead," Cora said.

Louise nodded. "Yes. Exactly."

Cora felt nervous. She didn't like this. Didn't like having some man right down the hall writing letters to a murdered man's wife, maybe even being the murderer. Didn't like it one bit. It made the apartment feel no longer safe.

She stared at her sister. "So, Louise . . . what do you think we should do?"

Putting everything back into the kitchen bag again gave Harcourt something to do while he tried to figure things out. Even if those weird Purjinsky sisters had taken his letter, so what? They only took stuff they could use. God knows what they were planning to do with one piece of notepaper, but whatever it was, it probably had nothing to do with what was written on it.

Besides, they probably didn't even know it was his. It was just a wadded-up sheet of paper in a bag of trash. Nobody had seen him take the bag down to the trash room. By the time the two old ladies had gotten there, Harcourt was back in his apart-

ment. Nothing to connect him with the letter to Anna. They probably wrote a grocery list on the back of the page.

Harcourt set the trash-filled grocery bag by the door. On the other hand, Karl Gersting's murder was already on the news. If the sisters saw the news item and connected Anna Gersting with the Anna in his letter, they might be able to conclude that Harcourt was involved.

What if they called the police?

Harcourt started to sweat. There was only one thing to do.

Somehow or another he had to find out how much the Purjinsky sisters knew, and get that letter back.

After that, he would see . . .

The question was, how to do it. He couldn't just barge into their apartment and start asking them about Karl Gersting's murder. And he couldn't very well knock on their door and ask if they'd happened to find an unfinished letter of his down in the trash room.

Harcourt shook his head. Damn the luck. He couldn't let his whole life, and his whole future with Anna Gersting, go down the tubes because of two weird old pack-rat ladies. Got to do something, he thought. Got to do something . . .

He let out a long sigh, then, frowning intensely, walked over

to the kitchen counter and opened a drawer. A small snub-nosed revolver lay next to a plastic tray containing a few knives, forks, and spoons and a cardboard box.

Harcourt removed the revolver and cardboard box and set them on the countertop. He opened the box, took out six bullets, and began loading them into the cylinder of the revolver, his dark brows low over his eyes, his lips pressed tightly together.

Louise had opened her mouth to say something else when a knock came at the door.

Cora put a finger to her lips and said, "Shh!"

She pointed the remote at the TV and clicked it off. Their living room fell silent. She looked across the room, jabbed a thin finger at the sheet of notepaper her sister had been using to write her puzzle words on, and whispered, "Do something with that! Hurry!"

Louise rested her cigarette on one corner of the ashtray. Picked up the sheet of lined notepaper. Hesitated.

The knock came again, louder. "Hurry up," Cora hissed.

Louise whispered, "What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Eat it! Anything! Just get it out of sight!"

With agonizing slowness Lou-

ise wadded the piece of paper into a tight ball and dropped it into the metal trash container at the side of her easy chair. She put the cigarette back in her mouth. The ashtray was full. She picked it up and dumped it into the trash can as well—a mound of ashes, spent matches, and cigarette butts. Then she put the ashtray back on the side table and nodded at Cora.

"All right," she rasped. "See who it is."

Cora didn't think that was at all sufficient. But there wasn't time for more. The knock came a third time. It sounded impatient, though that was probably her imagination. It seemed to penetrate to her bones like the spectral knocking in one of those ghost movies on TV.

She hoisted herself up from her chair and crossed to the door. Put the safety chain on. Opened the deadbolt. Turned the handle and eased the door inward the three or four inches the chain would allow. Peered into the dimness of the hallway.

A man stood there looking down at her from an unnerving height.

Cora looked up at him. "Yes? May I help you?"

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am." The man's voice was low. Heavy. Ominous. He had a big wide face with dark eyes and black eyebrows, and although he was

smiling, it was a tight smile, as though it pained him somehow. Almost a grimace. "My name's Bill Harcourt. I'm one of your neighbors. Apartment G." He waited, the dark eyes watching her.

Cora waited too. Without moving or taking the chain off, she said, "Yes?"

"Well," the man said, and now he seemed agitated. Nervous, maybe. Or impatient. "Well, this is sort of embarrassing. See, I'm a bachelor. I live alone. And, well, I'm trying to make myself a roast chicken dinner. See, all I usually eat is those TV dinners, frozen stuff. Pop it in the microwave. But I thought I'd try this. And, well, I don't have a cookbook or anything. And I went out today and bought myself a chicken. And, frankly, I don't have the slightest idea—"

"Who is that?" Louise rasped from the far side of the living room. "Cora? Who is that? Don't you go subscribing to no magazines. You know we can't afford it."

"You want us to tell you how to roast a chicken?" Cora's mind whirled like a merry-go-round. Was he telling the truth? It was easy to imagine wild things when you lived the way she and Louise lived. When you stayed in your apartment almost every day of every week of every year,

year after year, and only had local TV and whatever you could scrounge in people's trash to tell you about the real world. Maybe this man really wanted to know about his chicken.

"Cora?" Louise called.

"That's my sister," Cora said. She still wasn't sure, but it wouldn't hurt to talk to him. Besides . . .

She said, "Just a minute, please," pushed the door closed, and turned to face her sister. She took a few steps to the middle of the room and whispered loudly, "It's that man. The man in apartment G. He wants to know how to roast his chicken."

Louise's watery blue-gray eyes widened behind her thick lenses.

"He wants to come in here and kill us," she said in a hoarse, rasping whisper. "He'll kill us dead, Cora, if you let him in."

"No, I really don't think so," Cora whispered. "I think he means it. Besides, we can always call the police."

"It will be too late," Louise rasped. "We'll be dead."

"I've got that big sharp butcher knife in the kitchen, Louise. If he tries anything, I'll grab it and stick him with it. I really will." Cora really didn't know whether she could bring herself to stick anybody with a knife. But she supposed she might, if it was a matter of life and death. Maybe.

When her sister didn't reply,

Cora added, "And besides, if we don't let him in, he'll get suspicious. Suppose he's looking for that letter? Better to let him in, let him look and not find it. Then he'll go away and leave us alone."

"I suppose," Louise muttered.

"If we don't let him come in and look," Cora persisted, still whispering loudly, "I'll be afraid to sleep tonight. What if he comes back in the night and murders us in our sleep? Let him come in and look, and then he'll go and leave us alone."

Louise's eyes were huge. She just nodded. Her thick lips moved, but her mutterings were inaudible to Cora.

Cora hurried back to the door. She took the night chain off and pulled the door open wide.

The man from apartment G stepped inside.

Harcourt sized up the situation quickly.

A living room identical to his in shape and size but sparsely furnished with a battered sofa and two cheap easy chairs. Nothing that matched. Faded, threadbare carpet. Yellowing wallpaper. He couldn't even tell what the pattern was, though there must have been a pattern once. An ancient TV on a rickety metal stand. Harcourt wasn't surprised to see a rabbit-ears antenna and no cable wire.

The Purjinsky sisters watched him, like small suspicious birds, through wire-rimmed spectacles. They were old, probably eighty at least. Maybe more. Frail, wrinkled, stooped. Gaunt. The closer one peered up at him. Probably just over five feet tall. At six two, he felt like a giant in here. The other one slumped in a chair on the far side of the room, smoking a cigarette. Both of them wore long shapeless dresses and house slippers. The dress material hung around their skeletal bodies in drapes and folds.

The room smelled of cigarette smoke, and, he thought, some kind of ointment. Possibly medication. It smelled old.

He wondered what they'd done with his letter to Anna.

"Would you like some coffee?" the one nearest him asked. "It's instant, but there's cream and sugar."

"No, thanks," Harcourt told her. He just wanted to finish this as quickly as possible and get out. He hated it in here. It reminded him of . . . death.

"Sit down." The old lady pointed at an easy chair. "I'm Cora. That's my sister Louise. So you're going to roast a chicken. It's very simple. I can explain it to you in two minutes."

"Good," Harcourt said. He sat down on the chair. Dust came

up in a cloud. He tried not to touch anything.

"It's very simple," Cora said again. "You take your chicken and run some water over it in the sink. Wash it off good. The inside, too. You have to reach inside. There are usually giblets in there, but not as many as they used to put in. They're getting really cheap with the giblets these days. But you might find a neck, a liver, or a gizzard. Next you . . ."

While the old lady's quavery voice droned on and on about the stupid chicken, Harcourt examined everything in the room he could see. He slipped one hand into his jacket pocket and touched the cold hard metal of the revolver there. It reassured him, but only a little. He couldn't see one damn place in the entire room where there could be paper. Where did the old bats keep their paper? Where would they have stashed his letter?

Maybe they'd wrapped their garbage in it.

Suddenly an idea came to him.

"Excuse me," he said, interrupting the old lady. "I'd better write this down." He took his hand out of his pocket and made a show of patting his jacket and shirt. "Uh, I don't have anything to write on. You wouldn't happen to have, uh . . ."

Cora blinked at him. Her sister sat and smoked, not saying a word.

Cora said, "Certainly. Something to write on." She had been sitting on the battered sofa. She got up and padded in her house slippers over to a low table, pulled open a drawer. For a moment Harcourt imagined that she would take out a gun and shoot him. But she turned, and he saw a small notepad and pencil. She brought them over.

Taking them, he began jotting down meaningless instructions about the damn chicken, asking questions, "Leave it in the oven for how long? What temperature did you say?"

What he planned to do was brazen, but he had to do it. It was the only way. When the old lady finished her cooking explanations, Harcourt tore off the top sheet, folded it, and shoved it in his shirt pocket. Then he stood up, notepad in one hand, pencil in the other. The pencil was stubby and actually had toothmarks on it. The eraser had been worn away. He had no doubt that the two sisters had found it in the trash.

"Well," he said, "thanks. I appreciate it." Without hesitating, he walked directly across the room to the low table. Pulled open the drawer. Said casually, "I'll just return these . . ."

For a few seconds he stared

intently into the open drawer, searching for a sheet of lined, wrinkled notepaper containing his own handwriting.

Nothing.

The damn thing was empty.

Harcourt dropped the pad and pencil into the empty drawer, closed it, then glanced over at Cora and feigned embarrassment. "Oh. I'm sorry. I apologize. I wasn't thinking . . ."

"It's all right," Cora said. Her wrinkled face held a strange expression. The overhead light glinted on her glasses.

"I'm so used to just putting things away . . . I didn't mean to just open your drawer. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Cora replied. Even her voice was strange.

Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe she and her sister had in fact gone down to the trash room and rummaged through the junk. But maybe they hadn't taken anything of his. Maybe somebody else in the building also picked over the trash, and somebody else had his letter to Anna.

Or they had it in a different room. Their kitchen, where it had become part of a grocery list. Or their bedroom.

He couldn't search their entire apartment right here in front of them.

"Do you have a kitchen stove I could look at?" he asked. He no longer cared what they thought.

His fingers touched the bulge at his coat pocket, feeling the vague outline of the revolver. Let them think whatever they liked. "If I could just look at your oven before I go. It's hard for me to visualize exactly what you mean about a center rack. That kind of thing."

"In here." Cora still sounded strange. "I'll show you."

He followed her into a kitchen that, again, was the same as his own in size but different otherwise. Much dingier, much more bare. A gas range that probably dated to World War II. A tiny fridge. A sad table with metal tube legs, Formica peeling from the top.

No paper. No notes held on the refrigerator door with magnets. No notes on the kitchen table or countertops. Not a sheet of paper anywhere in sight.

Damn the luck.

Cora had stooped over and was showing him the inside of her oven.

"Yes," he said. "I see."

He didn't see. He didn't see a damned thing. It was futile.

He got a coughing attack. It was the last desperate thing he could think of. She offered him a glass of water, but he shook his head, still coughing, and asked hoarsely, "Do you mind if I use your bathroom before I go?"

He knew it was a bizarre request. All he really had to do

was leave, go down the hall to his own apartment, use his own bathroom.

But how could she refuse?

He saw the color appear in her pallid, wrinkled cheeks as two angry red dots.

"Very well," she said, almost spitting the words at him. "It's in there. Through the bedroom." She pointed a bony finger.

Harcourt continued to cough a little, held his stomach for effect, although by now she obviously knew he was lying. He followed her finger into a gloomy bedroom, all the curtains closed, smelling of things he didn't want to know about, and into the bathroom. He was hoping that he'd find the wadded-up paper in here, for whatever insane reason. Maybe Scotch-taped to the mirror with reminders jotted on it for buying more toilet paper and soap. He closed the door and searched.

There was nothing in the bathroom. Nothing he wanted. A miserable wicker hamper, a tiny sink, a tub surrounded by the cheapest possible shower curtain.

Harcourt emerged into the dark bedroom. He paused long enough to peer around, holding his breath against the powder and medication and other odors. Saw nothing. Hurried back into the living room, exhaling.

One old lady still sat in her

chair, smoking yet another cigarette. The second one, Cora, stood near the door, as if waiting to usher him out.

So he was wrong. Either they had never gone through his trash at all or they'd taken nothing. Someone else had . . .

Harcourt froze.

He'd been about to tell them goodbye. Cora's sister, what was her name, Louise, was puffing at her cigarette. She held it out and tapped ash.

Tapped it into a green glass ashtray that was chipped at one corner.

Son of a bitch . . .

Harcourt's hand went into his jacket pocket, and he gripped the revolver.

Cora knew.

As soon as the man asked for something to write on, she knew he was looking for the letter, knew he thought they had it.

When he went to the table and opened the drawer, she realized he was desperate. You didn't go around opening drawers in other people's apartments, people you'd just met. Cora got scared. If he was that desperate, what else would he do?

She thought about the butcher knife.

His coughing fit in the kitchen. Blatantly put on. Now she was really scared. If he was willing to insult her intelligence

with an act like that, no telling how far he'd go.

When he went into the bathroom, Cora grabbed the butcher knife from the drawer by the sink and hurried into the living room.

She hid it under a sofa cushion near one end, and prayed that she'd have time to snatch it out if need be. Louise hissed, "What's that for?"

"Quiet," Cora whispered back. "It's to save our lives."

The man returned to the living room. He looked defeated. She knew he'd found nothing because there was nothing for him to find where he'd been looking. His letter, if it was his, lay in the trash can beside Louise, half-buried now under ashes and matches and cigarette butts.

She stood by the door, willing him to leave.

Should've called the police. Shouldn't have let him in. Too late now. She looked at the man and thought, leave, go away.

Then she saw his eyes. Saw them go to the ashtray. Remembered she and Louise had taken it from the man's trash sack, along with his letter.

Knew it was all over.

Cora forced herself to cross the room and sit down on the sofa at the end where the butcher knife was hidden. She leaned against the arm and sneaked

her right hand down under the cushion. She could feel the wooden handle of the knife. Her thin, frail fingers encircled it. She waited.

The man's eyes flickered at her. Dark and threatening. It flashed into her mind that Louise had asked her for a six-letter word for *menace*, and it came to her: *threat*.

Time seemed to stop.

Then the man changed, something in his face. He looked at Cora. His mouth opened, shut again. He moved to the door.

"Thanks for your help," he said. His voice was utterly flat. His eyes were two black holes. "I'll be going now."

"Good luck with your chicken," Cora forced herself to say. Her own voice sounded high.

"That's a nice ashtray," the man said.

Cora's heart pounded. She felt dizzy, thought she might pass out. "Just some old thing," she said. "We found it—"

"A long time ago," Louise put in hoarsely. Loudly. "We found it a long time ago. In a junk shop."

"I see." His dead black eyes bored into Cora for a moment. He had one hand in his jacket pocket, and he kept it there as he opened the hall door with his other hand. "Well, I guess I'll see you later."

"Goodbye," Cora said, her

voice so high now that it came out as a kind of squeak.

"Goodbye," the man said. And went out. The door closed.

Cora rushed to the door, put on the chain, and shot the bolt. Then she went to the phone and called the police. It took her a while to get someone who would listen to her.

"Yes," she said, finally. "This is Cora Purjinsky, and I think I know who murdered that lawyer on the news. The lawyer with the wife named Anna."

Harcourt trudged back down the corridor to his own apartment, feeling almost ill.

He'd stood there in the apartment with his hand on the revolver, his finger on the trigger. All he had to do was take out the gun and blow them away. Two stupid old ladies. He could have turned up the TV real loud to cover the sound. Or used a pillow. Or both. He'd seen that once in a movie. But he'd kept his gun in his damn pocket, and the two stupid old ladies were still alive.

And they had his ashtray. No matter what they said, it was his ashtray. Harcourt knew it, and so did they. They were lying, which only proved that they did in fact have his letter to Anna.

Which meant that they knew.

They were probably on the phone to the cops right now.

And he hadn't been able to kill them.

Not for the first time, he wondered why Anna loved him, why she'd been willing to become part of this terrible plot to get rid of her rich lawyer husband and take Harcourt as her lover.

He couldn't even shoot two stupid old women.

So it was over. The police would be here soon. With questions. The whole thing would unravel, fall apart. Harcourt used his key. Stepped inside. Closed the door and locked it. Turned. And froze.

Somebody was in his apartment, sitting facing him in an armchair, pointing a gun at him.

"Anna," he said. "What the hell—"

"You should have shot Karl," she said.

Harcourt stared. His world fractured into a thousand pieces. He no longer comprehended it.

"What are you talking about?"

She steadied the gun. It was small and gleaming. "Don't move, Bill. Okay? What I'm talking about is, you should've shot Karl yourself, like we planned originally. But you couldn't. You couldn't pull the trigger."

"Anna—"

"So I had to do it myself."

He knew all this. Why was

she here, pointing a gun at him, telling him these things? In fact he knew the answer, he just couldn't accept it yet...

"Please, Anna—"

"Shut up." Her voice went hard, harder than he'd ever heard it before. It cut through him like a sharp knife. "So after I shot him, in that alley, I started thinking, What kind of a man is this, that I've risked my life for? Not much of a man. If you couldn't shoot Karl, maybe you couldn't stand up to the police. Maybe you'd sell me out to save your skin."

"No."

"Yes. Or no. Either way, it doesn't matter. I've decided not to take the chance. You're not worth the risk. You're the only person who knows I killed my husband."

He was terrified because he knew she meant it. But beneath the terror was an intense pain because he'd thought she loved him and now he knew she did not.

"I love you, Anna," he said. He took a step towards her.

In the last seconds it occurred to him, rather forcibly, that all he had to do was to take out his own gun and shoot her. She might get off a shot, but at least he'd have a chance.

But just as with her husband, just as with the two old ladies, he couldn't do it.

"I love you, Anna," he repeated.

Anna looked blankly at him and said, "That's too bad."

Even so, the shot surprised him. Maybe he'd hoped that at the last minute she'd cave in, just like him.

As the pain exploded in his chest like fire and the floor fell out from beneath his feet, Harcourt wondered if her husband had felt the same surprise . . .

Cora looked at her sister. "Did you hear something, Louise? Like a shot?"

"I heard a noise," Louise exhaled smoke. She ground out her cigarette and immediately lighted another. "Maybe it was a shot. Maybe not."

Cora got up and bent over the trash container. She started going through it.

"I guess we should give that letter to the police when they get here," she said, searching

through the debris. "Do you think that man shot himself? Committed suicide? Because he couldn't find his letter?"

"I don't know," Louise said. "But you won't find that letter in there."

Cora glanced up in surprise. "Huh? But you put it there."

"Yes. And while you and that man were in the kitchen, I took it out again. In case he came back and looked in there."

"Where'd you put it, then?"

"In there," Louise replied in her hoarse, rasping tone. One bony finger pointed at the green glass ashtray, already filling up with more ashes and cigarette butts.

"In there?"

"I burned it," Louise said. She sat back in her easy chair. "Let's have roast chicken for supper tonight. Okay?"

Off in the distance they heard the approaching wail of the sirens.

FICTION

BROKEN SHELLS

Stephen W.
Herring

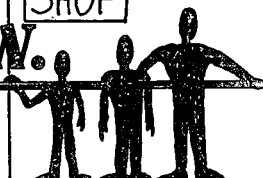


Illustration by Ray Basham

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/98

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Gibson's Gator Farm is one of those seedy Central Florida tourist traps that date back to the B.D. era—Before Disney. Miles of covered walkways ramble over acres of swamps and waterways jam-packed with alligators. This is no wildlife refuge where you'd be lucky to spot a single alligator slithering off a muddy riverbank. Gibson's Gator Farm is a place where you can get your fill of gators of all sizes, shapes, colors, and types of mutilation.

Deputy Sheriff Clay Briscoe, on the last day of his vacation, had his fill of the alligators two minutes after he arrived at Gibson's with his two teenage nephews in tow. The nephews had come down from Detroit to visit and to be escorted to all the sights by their obliging uncle. Briscoe had been on the Detroit police force for twenty years and took an early retirement deal after his wife died. He fled to Florida, where he had enjoyed the tarpon fishing off Boca Grande as a younger man and where he could get away from cloying relatives who delighted in steering unattached females in his direction at every turn. The least he could do for them was chauffeur them or their kids around on their infrequent visits.

Briscoe and the boys had done Disney, Universal, the Kennedy Space Center, and all the other

big attractions and were now down to the lower rungs of the ladder. By tomorrow the nephews would be on a plane back north, and Briscoe would be back on the job at the Palmetto County sheriff's department in Southwest Florida where he could get some rest and relaxation.

Briscoe's nephews were on summer vacation, and Florida was hot. There was no air conditioning on the open walkways at Gibson's Gator Farm, where the smells of hundreds of alligators curdled the sweltering humidity. Briscoe's nephews wanted to embark on a swamp tour that would go by the alligator nesting pens. Feeling his lunch beginning to rise, the stocky county cop told the boys to meet him in the gift shop when they were ready to leave. That was the one place at Gibson's that was sure to be air-conditioned.

The gift shop turned out to be much more than a shop; it was a vast souvenir emporium. Briscoe quietly slipped in a door near the rear of the building and let the relief sweep over him. The air was cool and dry, lightly scented with sweet orange blossom. A selection of wind chimes suspended in front of a massive air-conditioning unit gently tinkled random melodies. Heaven.

As he cooled off, Briscoe could focus on his surroundings. Who

on earth would ever buy junk like this, he wondered as he surveyed row after row of cheap souvenir merchandise: rubber snakes, sharks' teeth, plastic alligators of every description, and hundreds of objects both useful and ornamental made primarily of shells: egg timers, thermometers, bookends, clocks, and mugs all encrusted with brown and white seashells. He might resent some of his pushy relatives, but he would never stoop so low as to send them one of these crustaceous gewgaws for Christmas.

Then Briscoe, the trained observer, saw something that gave him an answer to his idle question. That large redhaired woman browsing at one of the overloaded racks would buy junk like this. She seemed intensely interested in the tourist bait arranged before her. The woman was well dressed and carried a splashy floral bag. Briscoe thought it odd that she was wearing her oversized sunglasses under the soft fluorescent lighting. Then it all came together as he watched her gracefully slip a shell-covered jewelry box with a plastic mermaid on top into her open bag.

All the signs of a shoplifter were there: the sunglasses, the open-mouthed bag, shopping in a remote corner of a large store. He was not surprised, but he had to decide if he was going to

do anything about it. He was on vacation and out of his jurisdiction. He had his nephews to think about, and this was the type of woman who could go all hysterical if someone put the collar on her. It just wasn't worth the fuss for a piece of junk that probably cost the store less than a dollar.

He wondered why an apparently well-off woman would take a risk like that for an item that would have cost her only a few dollars. A klepto? His detective instincts were aroused. As long as he had to wait, he might as well make it interesting.

As soon as the swipe was made, Briscoe turned to the wall and pretended he was interested in the display of novelty toilet seats arranged there. The redhaired woman picked up a gift set of citrus jelly jars and went to the cashier—another shoplifter technique to throw off suspicion, except in this case the jelly cost just as much as the jewelry box. While she was paying, Briscoe wandered out to the parking lot. He stood by his car deliberately fumbling with his keys.

The woman emerged from the white building and walked to a silver Mercedes Benz. Briscoe whistled softly to himself, then watched as she pulled out, giving him a good look at her license plate. Along the bottom

edge where the county of registration is stamped on standard Florida plates it said PALMETTO. Now that was Briscoe's jurisdiction, and this little exercise was getting interesting.

He wanted to jot down the plate number but found himself without a pen or pencil. He went back into the cool of the souvenir shop, borrowed a pen shaped like a thin green alligator, and wrote the number on the only scrap of paper he had on him, his ticket stub for Gibson's Gator Farm.

In the three years Clay Briscoe had been with the Palmetto County sheriff's department he had developed a close friendship with the senior officer of the southeast district, Deputy Earl Baker. Baker's three hundred pound girth confined him most of the time to the district substation, where he relished the duty of day-shift dispatcher. Except on those rare occasions when Sheriff Ernest Johnson was at the substation, Earl was the man in charge, usually dubbed Officer of the Watch when such formalities were required.

Earl Baker was a native Floridian with a large family. He had taken the widower from Detroit under his wing and enjoyed educating the big city cop in the ways and notions of Southern

law enforcement. But that was a two-way street, and Baker was smart enough to give Briscoe plenty of slack when it came to investigating tough cases. Only there weren't many tough cases in the southeast district of Palmetto County, which was just fine with both men.

When Deputy Briscoe reported for duty after leaving his nephews at the airport, he gave Earl Baker a brief rundown of his adventures, then almost as an afterthought handed him the ticket stub from Gibson's. "And this is where we went on our last day," he said. "Swell place if you like alligator soup. Nearly tossed my lunch."

"Don't approve of these places myself," drawled Baker. "Unnatural confinement. You get so many gators in one place they start eating each other."

"Yes, I saw the effects of that, too," said Briscoe remembering the many mutilations.

Baker flipped the stub over and said, "What's this, Clay? You get the phone number of some chickie up in Orange County?"

"That's a present for you. License plate number of a shoplifter at Gibson's gift shop. Palmetto County plates. Wondered if it might be one of your relatives."

"Didn't turn 'em in, did you?" Baker said in mock alarm.

"Not my turf. Anyhow, it was

only a cheap tourist-trap trinket."

Earl Baker pulled an official form from one of a dozen trays stacked on his desk and carefully clipped the ticket stub to a corner. "Okay," he said with a sigh, "give me the particulars—date, time, description, make of car, and so on. If it's one of our people, we should know about it."

Clay Briscoe gave all the details he could remember, knowing that his friend loved to collect juicy bits of information on the people in the district. If the information had no law enforcement value, it would at least be something to add to the gossip mill Deputy Baker ran from his dispatcher's desk.

Having given Baker the tidbit from his vacation, Briscoe put it out of his mind and resumed his regular patrol rounds in his air-conditioned cruiser. Moving through the sunbaked roads of the southeast district, surveying the neat saw grass lawns and pristine houses, he thought, it might be hot, but it sure ain't Detroit.

At the end of a quiet shift he changed into his civvies and was halfway out the substation door when Baker hailed him from behind the dispatcher's phone console. "Say, Clay, you know that Mercedes you spotted up in Orange County yesterday?"

"Yep." Clay Briscoe was look-

ing forward to his restaurant supper.

"Stolen. Reported last week."

"At least the thief has better taste in cars than in jewelry boxes."

"Owners are Ray and Delores Cook; you know, the folks who run R&D Real Estate. They didn't want to call it Cook Real Estate because they didn't want customers from up north to think about what would happen to them if they move down here: cook!" Baker said with a grin that widened all the way to his gold molars.

"If their name was Broil, that'd be more like it."

"I know Ray and Delores; known them for years. He's Kiwanis, you know. Anyhow, Delores is a big gal. Not as big as me, of course, but big. Red hair, too. What do you think?"

"I think someone should check up on her," said Briscoe, forgetting about his stomach.

"Done it!" said Baker, proudly folding his arms over his vast belly. "Called Ray Cook to chat and naturally inquired as to the well-being of his missus. 'Out of town a few days,' says Ray. I ask if the state police had come up with anything on his Mercedes. 'Nope,' says Ray. Now, Ray is normally a very talkative guy—got to be, in his line—but he sure didn't want to talk about his wife or his car to me."

"Did you report my sighting of the Mercedes to the state police?" asked Briscoe, knowing how Baker disliked them. To Deputy Baker, Florida state troopers were swaggering popinjays who looked down on city cops and even farther down on county cops, especially overweight ones.

"Was going to," Baker said. "Then I thought we might have a local case here. No need to drag the state boys in on a local case, don't you agree?"

"Sure, Earl, if it's a local case. You're thinking the Mercedes wasn't stolen at all, that Delores Cook has taken off with it for reasons unknown and to destinations unknown and Ray Cook may know more about it than he's willing to say?"

"That about sums it up, my boy. A little gumshoe action on our part wouldn't hurt before the state police send their bulls into our nice little china shop here, if you know what I mean."

"And I'm your gumshoe," said Briscoe with a wink. "You just jot down the Cooks' home and business addresses, and I'll start on it tonight."

Baker smiled and handed him a slip of paper with the information already neatly typed out.

Deputy Briscoe ate at the Blue Diner near the interstate. They always served a nice cube steak on Monday nights. By the time

he was back on the road, the sky over the Gulf of Mexico was streaked with pink. Near the flat horizon it was golden, silhouetting palm trees and beachfront condos.

He drove to an upscale development called Sand Dollar Estates. A giant white perforated disk representing a sand dollar shell stood guard at the entrance. Ray and Delores Cook's house stood on a dramatic curve of the roadway, all decked out in tropical ferns and citrus fruit trees. A dim light could be seen in one room. Briscoe sensed that the place was unoccupied. An experienced burglar would not hesitate to move on a house that looked like that. He thought he might take a closer look tomorrow, when in uniform.

The Enchanted Isle Plaza was a small shopping center with a strip of cutesy tropical storefronts anchored by a brass-and-fern pub style restaurant. The restaurant was familiar to the deputy, who made a point of sampling all the eateries in the district, but he couldn't remember visiting the shopping center in the line of duty.

R&D Real Estate was tucked between a beauty parlor and a used-book store. A large plate glass window let Briscoe see deep into the lighted office. A man at the far end of the room

was leaning back in his chair. He was in white shirtsleeves that matched the white of his well-groomed hair. Must be Ray Cook. He was talking to a young blonde woman standing next to his desk, clutching a sheaf of papers to her ample bosom. She had a desk near the front of the office, and she made frequent trips to Ray's desk.

After twenty minutes or so the lights in the office went off, and out came Ray and the blonde, laughing and chatting. They hopped into a small white sports car and zoomed off in the direction of Sand Dollar Estates. Briscoe jotted down some notes, got out of his car, and walked to the pub at the end of the plaza. It was time for a nightcap.

Clay Briscoe took his sleuthing notes to the substation the next morning and found that Earl Baker had been doing his homework, too. Through his wife's extended family, Deputy Baker had built an information grapevine with tendrils that reached to the far corners of the county and beyond.

"Got the poop on Ray and Delores Cook," he announced before Briscoe could say a word. "Seems there's trouble in paradise at the Enchanted Isle, and it's the oldest kind of trouble there is—another woman."

"That fits," said Briscoe. "I

was there last night and saw Ray working late with a very attractive blonde young enough to be his daughter. They looked cosy."

"Marge is her name. She's been working there six months. It's the old triangle, I'm afraid. Poor Delores."

"So another woman comes along, and Delores Cook takes off in the family car. Why did Ray Cook report it stolen?"

"That's what you're going to find out today, my boy."

By ten o'clock Deputy Briscoe was once again peering into the premises of R&D Real Estate, only this time he was in a county cruiser and he was wearing county khaki. The blinding sunlight made it hard to see in, so he waited until he was sure there were no customers inside before approaching the office. He pushed casually through the door, privately rejoicing in the cool interior with its exotic scents. The young blonde woman behind the front desk smiled brightly and asked if she could help.

"You sure can, miss," Briscoe said in his best adopted Southern manner. "I'm Sheriff's Deputy Briscoe from the district substation. You're new here, right?"

"Marge White, deputy—I'm pleased to meet you. I've only been here six months," she said,

extending a small hand with long red fingernails. She was a stunningly goodlooking woman. Almost too goodlooking, too perfect. Big mouth and eyes. The blonde hair flowed with a sparkling sheen to it. He hadn't expected "the other woman" to look like something on the cover of *Glamour* magazine.

He shook her hand. "Likewise, Miss White. It's just some police business with Mr. Cook, if you don't mind."

Marge White led Briscoe to the back of the office. Ray Cook popped up out of his chair. "Deputy Briscoe, so good to see you again," he gushed. Briscoe couldn't remember ever meeting him before but played along. As Marge White was returning to the front of the office, Ray Cook said, "I was just talking to Earl Baker yesterday—here, have a seat."

"It's about your car, sir," Deputy Briscoe said when the two men sat down.

"Have they found it?"

"Not yet, but it was spotted on Sunday up in Orange County."

"Really?"

"The thing is, sir, and this is why we wanted to tell you ourselves instead of you getting it from the state police, the person seen driving the car matches the description of your wife."

"Oh, I see . . . well, yes, I can understand your candor, and I

thank you for it." Cook's voice was down to a whisper. "The problem is, my wife did take the car. We've had a sort of falling out, you see . . . I hope I haven't done anything wrong," the whitehaired broker said, nervously glancing at the pretty young thing working at the front of the office.

"Why didn't you report it that way, sir?"

"Frankly, I was afraid it wouldn't get as much attention from the police. You see, the car actually belongs to our little company here—taxes, you know—and we need it to take our customers to showings. All we have now is Marge's Porsche. If we don't get the Mercedes back soon, I'm going to have to rent, and that's going to be expensive. Our clientele expects a certain level of service, you know."

"Well, Mr. Cook, we could cite you for filing a false report; if your car is found, you'll have a lot of explaining to do to whoever finds it. If Mrs. Cook contacts you, tell her she'd better get back here to help you work things out. This could mean more trouble for the both of you than not having a fancy car to impress your customers." Briscoe was firm but friendly. His instincts told him not to bring up the shoplifting; Ray Cook was shaken up enough as it was.

"I'm sorry, deputy; of course you're right. . . . It's just that there's another . . ." Cook looked over at Marge White again, then fell silent, hanging his head like a naughty boy.

Clay Briscoe suspected there was more to it. Ray Cook was not the type to play games with charges of grand larceny and misleading the authorities. But this was not the time or place to probe.

And he needed more background on this strange threesome.

Briscoe drove over to the other side of the district to see Rita Fortuna at Banyan Real Estate on Route 19. Banyan was not in the same league as Ray and Delores Cook's business. It catered to transients, renters, and refugees from the North with little more to their names than a hope and a prayer.

Banyan was where Clay Briscoe had gone to find his condo when he moved to Florida. Rita Fortuna was the agent who helped him. She was a native of Cuba with a very outgoing nature and exotic Latin features. Whenever she ran into the deputy from Detroit, she tried to talk him into a larger condo or a nice little house with a pool. Briscoe knew he would have to endure another sales pitch, but

that was the price he had to pay for the information he needed.

Rita shrieked with delight when Briscoe entered the tiny office. She proudly introduced him to two other women working there. They were impressed and slightly nervous meeting this man in a uniform. The office was decorated with artificial tropical greenery, and the walls were covered with posters of Caribbean resorts. It felt more like a travel agency than a real estate office.

Rita jumped right in. "A lovely little house in Sandalwood Pines has just come on the market," she confided to Briscoe. "It would be perfect for you, Clay. Pool. Plenty of privacy—"

"Thanks, Miss Fortuna, but I'm actually here on sheriff's department business and wondered if you could help."

"Rita! You must call me Rita. This is what is so wonderful about America. The police, even the military, can be friends with the people. I love it. But if it's police business, let's use the private office."

She led the deputy into a cubicle with just enough space for a small desk and three narrow chairs. "We use this office to close deals," she explained. "A little claustrophobia helps things along sometimes."

Briscoe crammed himself into one of the chairs. "I know you

keep up with the real estate market, and keep an eye on the competition, so I was wondering if you can tell me anything about R&D Real Estate over at the Enchanted Isle Plaza."

"Ray and Delores!" Rita shouted. "Sure, I know them! We've been to seminars together and even shared some sales. He flirts with me, the old fox, but they had a great marriage . . . until he goes and hires Miss Snow White, that is. He's a fool. I feel sorry for them."

"How's their business doing?"

"Well, they're a bit upmarket, you know, so the sales are farther apart. But lately I'm not seeing them listed very often as the broker of record in the transfers. I just assumed with their personal problems they haven't been very active," she shrugged.

"Except it looks like Ray Cook and, ah, Miss White are keeping regular business hours over at the office."

"Delores was the powerhouse of that outfit. I think Ray and his girlfriend are more interested in each other than in closing deals. You've got to work at it."

"Know anything about this Marge White?"

"Never met her. She doesn't show up at any of the meetings or seminars of the realtors' association. Of course we all gossip a lot about her. Someone, I forget who, told me he recognized her

from up around Ocala. But not from the real estate business. Maybe a model, or something," Rita Fortuna said with a wink.

"No idea who told you that?"

"Absolutely not, my deputy sheriff friend," she said with a big warm Latin smile.

Briscoe's investigation of Ray and Delores Cook was interrupted when he was called to the scene of a fender bender involving six frail elderly people who'd been riding in two huge Cadillacs. The old folks were so busy cussing each other out that Briscoe found it impossible to figure out which people were in what car, let alone what caused the accident. The radio in his cruiser crackled, and he heard his name. He tore himself away from the interrogation, hoping one angry lady wouldn't start swinging her oversized purse.

Dispatcher Earl Baker asked if he was still at the accident scene.

"Affirmative, Earl, and it's going to take a while. Six people and not a good witness among them," Briscoe said into the hand mike.

"As long as you're having fun, my boy, but listen up—check back here when you're done; they've found the Cooks' Mercedes."

"Where'd they find it?"

"Ocala."

Briscoe sat down at the dispatcher's desk and waited while Earl Baker finished a call. Baker noticed him and made gestures at a folder on the desk. Briscoe opened the folder and found a faxed state police report on the recovery of the Mercedes, Baker's report with the ticket stub from the alligator farm clipped to a corner, and the complaint form made out when Ray Cook reported the car stolen. He made sure the license number on all three forms matched before looking at the state police report.

According to the fax, Ocala authorities spotted the car in a restaurant parking lot. They waited two hours for the driver to show up, then impounded the car. The report suggested in terse militaristic jargon that the locals had blown it by "making their presence openly visible to any potential suspect in the immediate vicinity." It was the kind of jab Earl Baker loved to hate.

A description of the Mercedes' contents had one unusual item: "Back seat and flooring littered with fragments of broken or smashed seashells. Traces of blood on some pieces; sent to serology lab for analysis." Briscoe made a note of it. He looked up and saw several of the buttons on the dispatcher's console

flashing. Deputy Baker was going to be tied up for a while.

Briscoe slipped away to his own desk to call the Ocala police. When he returned ten minutes later, Deputy Baker was leaning back in his chair, sipping something from a gallon thermos on his lap.

"Iced tea. Really," Baker said defensively. "Special blend—keeps the pores open."

"Another one of your secret recipes, Earl?"

"No secret—you can have the recipe if you want it."

"I'll stick with coffee. The pores are doing fine. Constant perspiration keeps them open."

"You look at the report on the Cooks' car?"

"Delores must have been right there in the restaurant when they found it. Either it was a very long lunch, or she saw the cops and was scared off."

"Or she was in no condition to get back to the car. You sure there was no one else inside it when you saw it Sunday?"

"Not unless they were lying down on the floorboards."

Earl Baker frowned. "So we have a woman leaves her husband 'cause he's found himself a tootsie. She drives north, stopping off at Gibson's Gator Farm to rip off a memento of our wonderful state, gets as far as Ocala, and when the cops show up, she lets them take the car. Doesn't

make a whole lot of sense, does it?"

"Well, I've got a couple more pieces of the puzzle," said Briscoe, putting the Cooks' case folder back on the desk and opening the notebook he'd used when talking to the Ocala police. "It seems our Miss Marge White hails from Ocala herself. And, I might add, she is not unknown to the police in that fine burg."

"I knew it!" said Earl Baker, slapping his hand on the desk. "Making her living collecting sugar daddies, I'll betcha."

"That's what I thought, too, but it's all white collar stuff—funny books, check kiting, embezzlement, all business related. According to the sergeant in Ocala, Marge worked in the accounting department of some small electronics outfit called Microtronics. Money would go missing, get traced to Marge, and charges were brought against her, but they were always dropped. Finally the D.A. threatened to prosecute on behalf of the state. She was fired, and they haven't heard anything from her since."

"And the money problems stopped once she was gone?"

"The money problems have stopped, but they've got bigger problems now. Pentagon's been snooping around. Microtronics makes missile guidance systems to military specs. The Depart-

ment of Defense says they've been using inferior parts for the most expensive components. Could be a scandal big enough to sink the company."

Baker's eyebrows arched. "Our little Miss White involved with that?"

"They've taken a warrant out on a guy named Dennis Shepherd, one of their engineers. The sergeant said that Shepherd and Marge White were something of an item at Microtronics. She does get around."

"And where is this Shepherd fellow now?"

"At large. And now that they know where Marge White is, don't be surprised to see some Federal types showing up on our doorstep," Briscoe said as he flipped his notebook shut.

"Right now, my boy, I'm worried about Delores Cook. It looks like she went up there to get the goods on her rival and might have run into something bigger and badder than she expected. I'm going to put out a statewide missing persons alert on her, and I'm going to have to call up Sheriff Johnson and tell him what's going on with the Feds an' all. I'll tell ya, Clay, all this has just about ruined my day."

Briscoe stood up. "I'm going to talk to Marge White before anyone else does. She knows a lot

more about this business than we think."

The cool interior of R&D Real Estate was not so refreshing this time. It was chilling. Briscoe found the door unlocked but no one inside. It looked as if they had left in a hurry. A slim white strip of plastic was lying on the floor. Briscoe picked it up. It was a strap tie, the kind electricians and auto mechanics use to bind wires and cables. It was also notorious as a cheap form of handcuff used by criminals and law enforcement alike. It didn't belong in a real estate office.

On a hunch Briscoe sped over to Sand Dollar Estates to check out the Cooks' house. Just as he was pulling around the giant sand dollar shell at the entrance, a black Isuzu Trooper lurched out into the traffic. There were four people inside, but Briscoe only got a good look at one of them: a bulky red-haired woman in the back seat. Delores Cook.

Briscoe swung his cruiser around to follow, but the Isuzu was already out of sight. He picked up the radio mike and gave Earl Baker the details. Within a minute he could hear Deputy Doug Walker call in, "Black Isuzu speeding west on Hibiscus Boulevard near the Shell Museum. I'm in pursuit."

"You copy that, Clay?" It was Earl Baker's voice.

"Copy. Sounds like they're headed for the interstate. If they make it, you'll have to bring in the state police."

"Situation under control, Clay," Baker calmly answered. "I'm putting George Braden and Ernie Wallace on the ramps. We'll get 'em."

When Briscoe caught up with the Isuzu, it was bogged down in the traffic snarl caused by county cruisers blocking the on-ramps to the interstate. The deputies got it off the road and opened it up. In the front seat Briscoe found a rumpled young man with metal-rimmed glasses behind the wheel. He had Band-aids wrapped around a thumb and forefinger. Next to him a livid Marge White was shrieking a stream of obscenities that made the Detroit-hardened cop want to blush. According to the driver's license the man offered, his name was Dennis Shepherd. In the back seat Ray and Delores Cook, bound hand and foot with plastic strap ties, were blubbering like a couple of babies.

Dennis Shepherd and Marge White were booked on kidnapping charges along with a raft of motor vehicle violations thrown at Shepherd. They were not talking. Ray and Delores Cook were sent over to the county

hospital for a checkup, then brought back to the district sub-station for a little chat with deputies Baker and Briscoe.

"They were going to kill us, no doubt about it," said Delores Cook, her anger reddening her face to match her hair. Ray Cook, on the other hand, was pale and shaken. "I want them locked up for good, or they'll be back for us."

"Why were they going to kill you, Delores?" Earl asked politely.

"We know too much. We know what they were up to, and we became a liability when the lid blew off their little scheme."

"And what little scheme would that be?"

"I don't know what it was exactly. Some kind of smuggling. No drugs, though, Earl; I insisted on that," Delores said righteously.

Briscoe leaned forward. "Suppose you start at the beginning," he said. "I would guess that was about the time you hired Marge White."

Delores glowered at the shrunken form of her husband. "You mean about the time *he* hired Marge White. Always the sucker for a pair of batting eyelashes and a well-turned ankle, aren't you, Ray?"

Ray Cook said nothing.

"That's when it started," admitted Delores. "We did need

help in the office, and Marge did have a business background . . . and, well, our male customers tended to drool all over her, and that didn't hurt things either. We paid her well, but that wasn't enough. She started playing games with our books and working deals with our customers behind our backs. I suspected something was wrong right away, but Ray here wouldn't hear of it. Then I got some evidence and confronted her; was going to fire her."

"But Marge had a better idea," Briscoe guessed.

Delores Cook squirmed a bit in her chair. "Well, she owed us a few thousand. She said there was a way we could get it back. All I had to do was take a few trips to Ocala and pick up some tourist trinkets along the way. I deliver them to her boyfriend Dennis and collect a thousand each time. When it was over, Marge and her friend would be leaving the country. We'd get our money and get rid of Marge at the same time."

"Would those trinkets be small shell-covered jewelry boxes?" Briscoe asked.

"Yeah. Say, how come you know so much about this? Was this some sort of police sting or something?" Delores said, indignantly parking her fists on her wide hips.

"No, ma'am," said Briscoe.

"We've just been investigating this for awhile."

"Well, you probably know the rest, then. There were twelve shops all the way from Cypress Gardens to Silver Springs. All I had to do was buy the boxes with the mermaid ornament and deliver them to Dennis at a restaurant in Ocala."

"But you didn't always buy them."

"Well, okay, sometimes I lifted them. If something went wrong and the cops started asking around, I didn't want anybody describing the redhead who was always buying those dumb things. And it worked fine until this last time."

It was Earl Baker's turn to fill in the blank. "Cops hauled in your car, didn't they, Delores?"

"Thanks to the gutless wonder over here," she said. "He didn't want me getting into anything crooked, but he couldn't stop me. He doesn't have the guts to take it all to the police, so he reports the car stolen and nearly gets us both killed!"

Ray Cook finally spoke: "I thought it was one way to make you stop without everything having to come out."

"It might have worked," Briscoe said, "except when the police found your car you were right there with Shepherd in that restaurant."

"He saw the cops and went

crazy," Delores said. "He said I'd set him up, that they'd been getting suspicious of him at work and I probably tipped them off for a reward. He made me get in his Jeep or whatever it is, got a gun out of the glove compartment, tied me up with those straps, and drove back down here. It was terrible." She began to sob again.

Ray Cook said, "He came to the office and told Marge what had happened; then she took over. She ordered me into his car and had me tied up just like Delores. They took us home to pick up money and our passports. I thought we were goners for sure."

"Can either of you tell me what those jewelry boxes were all about?" Briscoe asked.

Delores brought her sobs under control. "Computer chips of some sort. Dennis would sit in the back seat and break off the shells and take out these shiny wafers the size of nickels. He said they were put in there when the boxes were made in Guatemala. They came from China, I think he said. That last time he was so nervous he cut his fingers prying the shells off."

Briscoe nodded. "These were the cheap replacement components Shepherd was putting in the missile guidance systems at Microtronics. He probably sold the originals for a hefty profit."

"They were only in the boxes with that ugly mermaid on top," Delores continued, "to make sure no one would buy one before I got to it. Talk about bad taste!"

"You've always been a lady of good taste, Delores, I'll say that much for you," Earl Baker said.

"So, Earl—" the tears welled up again—"you going to put us on a chain gang?"

Deputy Baker scratched his head. "Well, it doesn't look too good. I'll have a talk with Judge Cantwell, explain the situation and put in a good word. Can't promise anything. I do have just one more question, though." He turned to Ray Cook. "Ray, there's been a lot of gossip going around about you and this Marge White. I wouldn't be a party to it, of course, but it would help things if you could clear the air, so to speak."

Ray Cook lowered his head. "Delores is right. I do have a roving eye, and I was quite taken with Marge when she showed

up looking for a job. But I'm all smoke and no fire, Earl—I've never once been unfaithful to Delores in all these years. So when Marge learned she couldn't use me in her schemes, she went to work on Delores. I'd say that we were all victims of her ways—me, Delores, even that boyfriend of hers. She found our weak points and used them."

He ran his fingers through his white mane and smiled wearily. "And you know, Earl, of the four of us, she's the one who'll walk away from this with no more than a slap on the wrist."

Baker thought about Judge Cantwell, a Southern aristocrat he had known for thirty years and a chivalrous gentleman when it came to extremely attractive women.

Baker wouldn't have admitted it to anyone in the room, but he knew that Ray Cook was probably right. Marge White was going to walk.

FICTION

The DioscURI Deception

James Lincoln
Warren

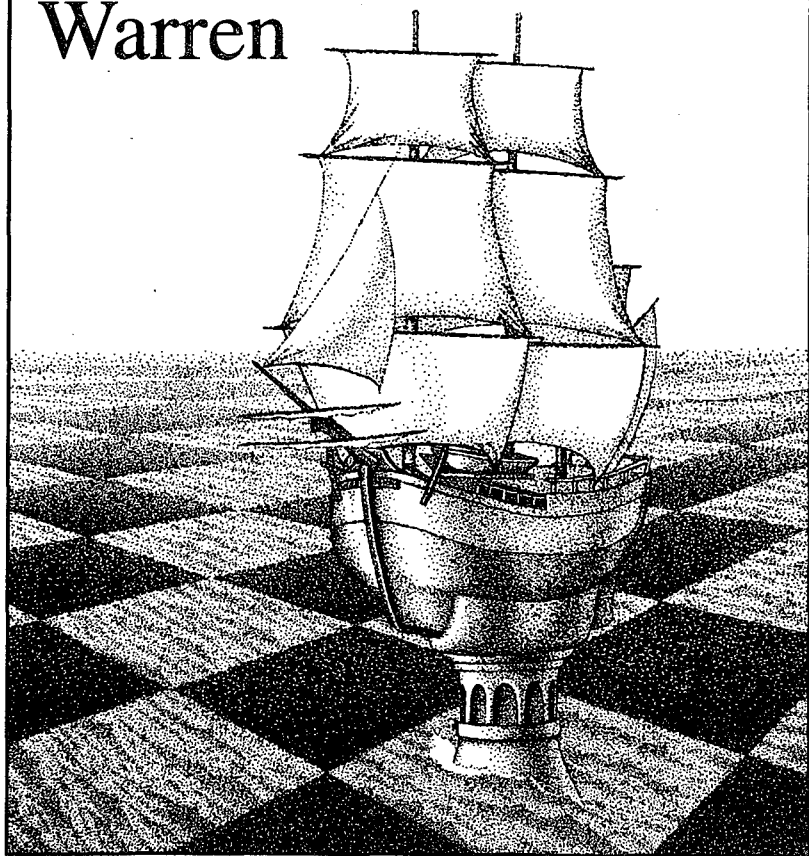


Illustration by David Monette

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/98

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The spring of 1771 progressed steadily toward summer. The evening air grew brighter and clearer, and the skies, which until late May had been dominated by billowing white clouds, became increasingly transparent, so that even the bright lights and fireworks of Vauxhall Gardens did little to dim the spectacle of the stars. Morning arrived early, and London awoke to daylight well before seven o'clock, when Alan Treviscoe arrived at the common room of Lloyd's in the Royal Exchange.

The new rooms were a far cry from the old coffeehouse in Lombard Street. Old Lloyd's had not even provided a separate room for the subscribers. Here, however, the premises projected an impression of wealth, responsibility, and solidity—and the restriction of entry into the subscribers' room was clearly posted. But though much was different, much remained the same. There was still the bustle of Tom Fielding's waiters delivering cups of coffee for a penny each, underwriters still crowded the bar to consult the Register or obtain a copy of Lloyd's List, and there was still the omnipresent pall of tobacco smoke rising from dozens of pipes as contracts were sealed with pleasantries over a friendly puff or two.

Treviscoe ordered toast and

coffee and leaned back in his chair, intending to consult an octavo volume of Philidor's *Analyse de jeu des échecs*, as he was a chess enthusiast. There seemed little else available to engage his powers of concentration: there was no news of consequence in the List. Before he could settle into a critique of Ruy López de Segura's famous opening, however, his attention was diverted by a man hurrying in from the Corn-Hill. The man was of middle age, dressed in fine, sober clothing of superior cut, but he had obviously been the object of some violence. Although his head was shaved, he was wigless and hatless. His coat, breeches, and stockings were spattered with mud. His forehead was badly bruised.

There was a brief stir at his entrance, stilled only when the man vigorously declined any assistance. Once past the threshold he stopped fast, and Treviscoe watched him as his eyes tried to pierce the smoke in search of a specific person. The man's eyes widened with recognition as he located whom he sought, and then like a musket shot he bore straight for a table not far from the bar. The octavo volume of Philidor dropped gently to Treviscoe's lap, the place where he left off still held by his index finger, but chess was now completely forgotten.

The stranger engaged in animated conversation with a man at the table, both speaking in low voices so that no one could overhear. Treviscoe recognized the seated man as the underwriter Josiah Barron, but he still had no idea as to the identity of the stranger. At length Mr. Barron stood and, gesturing with his walking stick, indicated that he and the stranger should approach Treviscoe's table.

Treviscoe sat up sharply. A commission?

As Mr. Barron led the stranger toward him, Treviscoe stood.

"Mr. Macleod, allow me to present Mr. Treviscoe," Barron said. "Mr. Treviscoe, Mr. Macleod of the Company of Adventurers."

"I am honored to make your acquaintance, sir," said Treviscoe. "Would you care to be seated? A coffee perhaps?"

"Brandy would be more to the purpose," said Macleod, so visibly agitated that Treviscoe thought he must burst. He nonetheless managed to sit, and Barron and Treviscoe followed suit. At close quarters Mr. Macleod's injuries were uglier, but there was a stubborn gleam of purpose in his eye that was emphasized by the clipped Scottish manner of his speech.

"Regrettably—I say regrettably in view of your circumstances, sir—Lloyd's does not serve

spirits," observed Mr. Barron, "as being contrary to the good practice of responsible business. I believe, however, that a cup of tea could be offered. The palliative effect of tea is well known, Mr. Macleod, if Dr. James's medical dictionary is any authority."

Treviscoe flagged a waiter. "Tea for Mr. Macleod; and another coffee for me. Mr. Barron?"

Barron declined by shaking his head.

"Mr. Macleod has a serious problem, Treviscoe," said Barron. "Unfortunately it is beyond the ability of the assurance underwriters to offer him any resolution."

"I am not satisfied on that account," said Macleod resentfully.

"Sir, the vessel and cargo were insured until their arrival in London," said Barron pointedly, "and by your own testimony to me, you personally witnessed their safe arrival. You stood upon *Polydeuces*' main deck yesterday afternoon and saw with your own eyes that her cargo was intact."

"*Polydeuces* had not left her anchorage before the theft was discovered!" Mr. Macleod's whisper did not disguise his agitation. "Nor has she left her anchorage even now! Therefore, she has not reached her destination! What could be clearer than that?"

"But she is anchored in the Thames, just below London Bridge," said Barron, and belatedly recognizing that Macleod was not a man to be argued with, he continued smoothly, "You have, of course, every right to attempt to secure payment of the insurance through application to the courts, but I tell you as a friend—yes, as a friend—that the likelihood of their deciding in your favor is exceedingly remote. That is why we're speaking with Alan Treviscoe. Perhaps it's not too late to find the cargo. Surely that would be preferable in every way to a loss."

Macleod looked suspiciously at Treviscoe, who in accord with the modern fashion eschewed a powdered wig in favor of his own dark brown hair. "Young, ain't he?"

"Yes, sir, I am young, but your national hero Sir William Wallace was himself a mere twenty-seven when he took Stirling Castle," said Treviscoe. "If it is in the power of any mortal man—Scot or English; Anglican, romanist, Presbyterian; Whig, Tory, or Radical—to recover your cargo, Mr. Macleod, then I shall do so."

"For a fee, I reckon," said Macleod.

"Certainly for a fee, sir, *videlicet*, for ten percent of the insured value of the cargo."

"And now he spouts Latin if you please! Have you turned me over to some rascally lawyer, Barron?" cried Macleod.

"Perhaps I should have mentioned that Mr. Treviscoe is a man of some information," said Barron, "having been educated at the university in Heidelberg. While it is true that men of scholarly virtues are oft less gifted in the affairs of business, I assure you that with regard to Mr. Treviscoe this is not the case, and thus entreat you to listen to him."

"If the cargo is recovered, I'll have no claim against the underwriters," said Macleod, "which means the cost of covering and recovering the cargo will climb to fifteen percent of its value. At a guinea's worth per pound of pelt, that's two shillings tuppence and a ha'penny more per pound beyond the shilling, penny, and farthing apiece I paid you for insuring the cargo. Three shillings thruppence and three farthings of every guinea to be earned! That does not leave much room for profit!"

"I believe it's closer to three shillings tuppence—" observed Barron.

"Who's to argue over a penny, man! 'Tis too much!"

"Then sue the underwriters for the cost of my services," said Treviscoe. Barron gave him a

sharp look. "If the courts decide that they are still liable for the cargo from the time of its disappearance, they will be accountable for the cost of recovering it. But I doubt there is much time to lose if we are to recover it. Tell me what happened."

"'Tis a most delicate—"

"I assure you, both as a matter of my personal honor and in the interest of my profession, such as it is, that any words imparted to me concerning the loss of your cargo will be held in the strictest confidence," said Treviscoe.

Macleod frowned. He was deeply displeased, and the shock of his recent experiences still made his nerves vibrate like the strings of a fortepiano.

"Aye," he said at last, "I'll tell ye, then.

"You must understand that the Company of Adventurers—the Hudson's Bay Company—operate in the strictest secrecy. We do not have the resources of other monopolies—certainly not the resources of the East India Company—and we have found that the best guardian against mischief in the plying of our trade is a tight lip. No one could have known *Polydeuces* was leased to us—"

"Leased? Is that usual? You do not own your own ships?"

"Who can afford to keep their own blasted fleet? She's leased."

"Who is her owner?"

Macleod paused, trying to remember. "*Polydeuces*. If I recall, her owner is Mr. Jonathan Eccles."

"Jonathan Eccles. A learned man, is he not, famous for his facility with the Latin and the Greek?"

"I remember something of the kind. D'ye ken him?"

"I may have made his acquaintance, or read a translation of his in one of the periodicals. But I interrupt your story."

"To return to it then: no one could have known *Polydeuces* was ours unless he'd seen her sail out of Hudson's Bay. I spoke with Captain Nichols shortly after *Polydeuces* arrived on the evening tide, and he told me there'd been no trouble. But this morning, when I reached her anchorage to see for myself, she was deserted: the cargo was gone and the ship's hold empty as a rakehell's purse. It should not have been possible. It cannot have been possible! Yet there she was, pristine as an angel except that every bale of beaver pelts, every stick and spar, every barrel and hogshead was gone."

"What was her condition? Was there any sign of a struggle?"

"Nary a one, lad. There was nothing there at all—no crew, nothing—nothing but the captain's logbook, open on the table in his cabin."

"The crew gone, too."

Treviscoe removed his hand from Philidor and stroked his face thoughtfully. "And no mention of anything untoward in the log?"

"How could there be?" said Macleod mournfully. "There was never an opportunity for Nichols to make another entry. And now comes the darkest part of my tale. Captain Nichols came ashore with me after I met him at his anchorage—he was to proceed to the company's docks to make arrangements for bringing the ship in after our meeting. We are old friends, and I happened to bring with me a bottle of malt, and we sat for hours reminiscing before it was time for us to go ashore. Because he had given liberty to all the crew except for the anchor watch, we did not take his own boat but rode in the last boat ferrying the sailors to the steps.

"There we were hailed by name by a boy, a linklighter, sent to convey us to the company's headquarters in Culver Court on Fenchurch Street by the quickest route—"

"Did it not strike you as odd that no carriage was sent?"

"For so short a journey? How were we to think it odd? We followed the boy, and in the midst of a black street he extinguished his torch, and we were set upon by several great strong bastards

—chairmen, maybe, or even sailors.

"There was long steel in that alley, lad, and as we fought, not seeing anything, I heard Nichols cry out hideously, 'Run, Angus! I am murdered!'"

Overcome with emotion, Macleod placed his hands over his eyes. "Never more again, Ian Nichols, will we drink to each other's health. He was dead, stabbed straight through the heart, and I had his blood on my own fingers until I washed them in the Bow Street Court scarce an hour ago. It was in that alley that I lost my hat and wig. After running aimlessly I finally stumbled upon a charlie making his rounds; he brought me to Bow Street."

"If we was to search, perhaps we could find the wig and hat and know precisely where it was that Captain Nichols was murdered," interjected Barron, "and derive from that intelligence the identities of your as-sailants."

"It is in my mind that no wig nor hat lying unattended in a London alley should for long be without an owner," replied Treviscoe. "A beaver felt tricorne is worth a year's wages—and a fine wig as much. It were easier to find poor Captain Nichols' body, if it has not already been sold to the Royal College of Physicians. But that is an en-

terprise we can safely leave to the Bow Street bailiffs." Turning back to Macleod, Treviscoe said, "If everything you've told me so far is the unvarnished truth—"

"D'ye suggest that I lie?" sputtered Macleod, outraged.

"Not at all, sir. But surely your brain is excited, and in such a condition it is not unknown for false impressions, however well intended, to push more accurate observations from the nest. Do not take offense, I beg you, for I have none but your own interests at heart, and the resolution of this crisis depends on the absolute verity of what you have told me."

"As Christ died on the cross it is the truth," swore Macleod, not entirely mollified.

"Then there is hope, however faint. But I perceive you have not finished with your account of these fell circumstances."

"No, I've not. During the combat one of the brutes told us we'd never see the cargo again. After I took the report of Captain Nichols' murder to Justice Sir John Fielding at Bow Street, I hastened back to inspect the ship. I swear I'd not been away from *Polydeuces* above four hours, and even as the dawn began to break, I climbed up her side—with great trouble, as there were no sailors aboard to assist me—went directly to the

hold, and saw there—nothing. It was empty as I have said."

"Scarce four hours? How long would it usually take for a large party of stevedores to handle such cargo?"

Macleod pursed his lips, then shook his head violently.

"Why, man, 'twould take all day, mayhap two, and then with the ship not at anchor but pier-side, with full tackle and brows fore and aft leading ashore."

Treviscoe nodded thoughtfully, then gestured to a passing waiter. "Watkins, kindly fetch Mr. Fielding."

"Mr. Fielding?" Macleod sat back in his chair. "Not one of Sir John's relations?"

"No, Mr. Macleod," said Barron. "Tom Fielding is the coffee man at Lloyd's whose assistance in restoring our reputation after the events of 1769 was invaluable."

A quick, intelligent looking man in his late twenties approached.

"Mr. Barron. Mr. Treviscoe." Not knowing the name of Mr. Macleod, Fielding bowed to him. "I am, sir, Thomas Fielding. Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

"This is Mr. Macleod," said Treviscoe. "He has engaged me in a certain matter, Tom, and I must beg your indulgence in executing certain favors so that

his affairs may reach a happy conclusion."

"Lloyd's Coffee House is always prepared to assist in whatever way we can."

"I need someone to copy the entries in the Register for every ship on the List that intends to sail with tonight's tide. Haste is of the essence."

"I'll get Sam Pritchard to do it, sir. He's possessed of a quick, elegant hand."

"Thank you. You can reach me at Captain Gunn's house." Treviscoe looked at Macleod again and, pausing briefly, addressed him rapidly. "I don't know how else to inform you, sir, that there exists a strong possibility that some expense may be involved in retrieving your pelts beyond the ten percent you have agreed to pay me, if indeed retrieved the pelts can be. It is my feeling that desperate men, desperate in action and in purpose, are responsible for the murder and the theft, and that decisive measures must be taken to ensure that your cargo is restored to you. I intend to enlist the aid of one of your countrymen, my particular friend Captain Gunn, a post captain in His Majesty's Navy, and whatever forces he may command. For himself, the promise of action will be quite payment enough, I am certain, but his agents will naturally expect to be remunerated for their

efforts. I assure you that a more capable or dependable deputy could not be wished for in an affair of this kind than Magnus Gunn."

"If it will get back our pelts, do what ye must," said Macleod. "Their loss, without reasonable compensation from the responsible quarter—" this with a grim and pointed glance at Barron "—would be intolerable."

"Thank you, sir," said Treviscoe. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two printed contracts.

The filling-in of the blank portions took a few minutes, and Treviscoe and Macleod each retained a copy. "And now, my apologies but it was never more appropriately said that the tide waits for no man. I may say that I hope to return bearing good tidings before the sun has set."

Treviscoe stood and, putting Philidor on the table, reached for his tricorn and his smallsword. Picking up the book, he offered it to Macleod.

"This book is the most brilliant that ever was writ on the subject of chess. Keep it as a hostage against your cargo, for it is near to my heart. Read it if it please you." And with that, he was gone.

"Damn me," muttered Macleod, turning through the book, "the blasted thing's in *French*."

Alan Treviscoe indulged in the unheard-of expense, for him, of hiring a carriage to take him to Captain Gunn's lodgings west of London Bridge. He was admitted immediately.

Magnus Gunn met him in the drawing room, standing with his hands behind his back, as if he were on a ship's quarterdeck, below Gainsborough's portrait of his wife. Treviscoe had to admit the portrait was a good likeness, showing Charlotte Gunn to considerable advantage, and that the painting was nearly as beautiful as the woman herself. He liked the painting more, actually, because it could not speak.

Invariably, when Captain Gunn's lady condescended to talk to Alan Treviscoe, it was with patronizing airs and thinly veiled hostility. But Gunn was alone, Charlotte not having yet descended from her bedchamber, if indeed she was even awake at such an early hour.

"Magnus, how many men would it take for you to cut out a Hudson's Bay Company ship?"

"Cut out—" Gunn shook his large, red-tressed head in wonder. "I'd say about twelve in a longboat, provided none of them was a stranger to a cutlass."

"Who is a stranger to a cutlass?" asked a well-modulated female voice, and Charlotte en-

tered the room, habited in a calico manteau and lace-frilled cap.

"Your servant, madam," said Treviscoe automatically, bowing slightly.

"No one," said Gunn, blushing violently.

Charlotte pursed her lips. She was only too aware of what sort of purpose was likely to bring Alan Treviscoe calling before eight of a morning, that sort of which she knew she could not possibly approve. She was jealous of her stolid respectability in a very class-conscious way, and she was certain that Magnus's mercurial friend would sooner or later disgrace himself. Charlotte felt it her duty to keep the name of Gunn unbesmirched, especially as it had been her own for nearly two years.

"How are your family, Mrs. Gunn?" politely inquired Treviscoe. "I trust Dr. Merwood, Mrs. Merwood, and Miss Elizabeth are in good health."

"Tolerable good health, sir, to judge from my sister's last letter. She particularly wished me to remember her to you," she replied, a hint of disapproval in her voice. She did not add that Elizabeth had turned down another suitor. What the idiot girl saw in Alan Treviscoe was a great mystery—luckily, she'd refused him once, following Charlotte's advice. He had no for-

tune; it was rumored he was a Catholic—

Gunn's navy steward Harkness, who served in the household as a de facto butler, groom, and valet, entered the room and stood at a respectful distance behind Charlotte. "Which there's a boy at the door with a letter for Mr. Treviscoe," he said, broadly winking at Treviscoe, knowing he was safe from the gorgon gaze of his mistress.

"He's from Lloyd's, bearing critical intelligence," said Treviscoe, struggling with his purse for a penny. "You may give him this for his trouble." Harkness took the small silver coin and returned in a moment with the letter.

"This matter of intelligence," said Gunn nervously, "it's confidential, is it not?"

"I gave my word," said Treviscoe.

"Then if you would be so good as to excuse us, my dear," said Gunn to his wife, direly expecting the intemperate anger he was certain his words would provoke.

But he had underestimated Charlotte's attachment to her dignity. She would not, under any circumstances, allow the creature Treviscoe to see her lose her composure.

There would be time enough for a reckoning in private, later.

"I quite understand," she said

primly, and curtseying to Treviscoe, she left the room. The two men sighed in relief, and Treviscoe tore the letter open.

"As I expected," he said. "*Castor*, rated A2, is scheduled to depart on the evening tide. She's at dock in the City, preparing to sail into the Baltic. She must not be allowed to get under weigh."

"What's to be done?"

"Find your twelve men, Magnus—"

"Eleven, sir," muttered Harkness.

"—and promise them whatever wage you deem fair. I'm for Bow Street this instant to petition Sir John Fielding to assign a couple of right bumbailiffs to your party, and God willing, there will be justice served. We must not dawdle."

"Have the runners meet me at the Temple steps," said Gunn. "Will you be with them?"

"No—I have an urgent appointment with a man of letters," Treviscoe said. "After you have secured the *Castor*, proceed directly to the 'Change, and there join the company of Mr. Barron of Lloyd's and a Mr. Macleod of the Company of Adventurers. Mr. Macleod will be easy to recognize, since he's as bald as an egg—a purple egg, at that. Convey him to *Castor*, and if all is well, meet me later at Lloyd's. I will join you at the

earliest opportunity, but now I must hurry."

Two hours later Treviscoe in the company of a large Bow Street runner named Gilmore was in Whitefriars. The two stationed themselves in an alley behind a tavern that Treviscoe, after several polite but pointed inquiries, had determined was the lodging of Mr. Jonathan Eccles.

"Why are we in this damned alley, then, sir?" asked Gilmore in a hoarse stage whisper loud enough to announce the Final Judgment.

"If we wish to meet with Mr. Eccles," replied Treviscoe in a low voice, "we cannot expect to do so by awaiting him at the front door."

Gilmore smirked sagaciously. "A back door sort of gentleman, then. My kind of brigand he be."

"Hide, Gilmore. This must be he now."

A short, portly man, his tricorne pulled down to obscure his features and dressed in a great-coat in spite of the heat, slipped quietly out the back door. He furtively glanced up and down the alley to see if he was observed, causing Treviscoe and Gilmore to shrink behind the wall they had selected as cover, and then began to walk ginger-

ly—or more precisely skulk—toward the top of the alley opposite.

"The runt ain't seen us, sir," said Gilmore, forgetting to whisper and preparing to sally forth. "Where's he off to?"

Treviscoe restrained him. "We must trail him at a distance, Gilmore, until he has crossed into the Temple—his destination must be the Temple steps and a boat—and thus forsaken the legal protection of Whitefriars and entered into the City's jurisdiction. We may then safely take him into our custody."

"Don't know about safely, sir," said Gilmore, slapping his cudgel against his palm. "There's a small-sword under that coat, or my name's not Jack Gilmore."

"Pray he's not concealing a pistol," said Treviscoe. "Now, let's follow."

Eccles led them on a circuitous route, often doubling back, so that Treviscoe and Gilmore feared they must be discovered.

"A fox has less cunning than a man in debt," whispered Treviscoe after a particularly close call.

But eventually, inexorably, Jonathan Eccles forsook the protection of the Whitefriars enclave, preparing for a dash to the Temple steps and the safety of the Thames.

"Now, Gilmore!"

"Mr. Jonathan Eccles!" roared

Gilmore. "In the name of the King, I arrest you!"

Eccles stopped cold, turned, and broke into a run, Treviscoe and Gilmore hard after him, but when it became clear he could not outstrip them, he threw off his coat and drew his sword not fifty yards from the steps and refuge. "Come at me, then," he cried in a trumpeting tenor, "and see if you are equal to the instructions of Mr. Angelo!"

"My fencing master wasn't an Italian," said Treviscoe, drawing, "but he well knew the effects of a skillfully wielded blade." Gilmore raised his cudgel, but Treviscoe motioned him back. "Allow me the pleasure, Mr. Gilmore."

Eccles lunged. The two small-swords met with a percussive ring as Treviscoe parried *en quarte*, and his riposte pierced Eccles' right shoulder, staining his sleeve with a sudden effusion of blood. With a cry of pain Eccles dropped the sword.

"Mercy!" he cried. "I know not who your principals may be, but I am prepared to fulfill my debts to them. I am merely days away from acquiring a great fortune, one which might accrue to your benefit as well. Stay your sword, and let us parley."

"Your debts are greater than you pretend," said Treviscoe, "and you shall pay for them not at the end of my small-sword but at the end of a rope."

Eccles regarded him with horror.

"I know the fortune whereof you speak, Mr. Eccles, and how it was bought with Captain Nichols' blood. Allow me to advise you that by now the booty you have stolen is yours no longer, but in the control of the Royal Navy, whence it shall be returned to the Hudson's Bay Company."

"Come along, then," said Gilmore, seizing Eccles by the collar. "Sir John will have a few words for you, and not welcome ones neither, I'll warrant."

It was late afternoon by the time Treviscoe returned to Lloyd's. There he found Mr. Barron, Mr. Macleod, and Captain Gunn in high spirits.

"I don't know how you did it, my boy," said Macleod, "but this calls for a bottle! Let us repair to a tavern and drink to your success, aye, and to the memory of Captain Nichols."

The party left the building by the door to 'Change Alley and walked to the George and Vulture tavern.

"How did you know that Mr. Eccles had stolen the furs? And how did he get them all into the *Castor* in four hours?" asked Macleod. "It would take an army to throw the bales overboard in such a short time, and the river would need to have been

jammed with a veritable fleet of mudlarks."

"The simple answer is this: Mr. Eccles did not remove the bales into the *Castor*," said Treviscoe. "You told me yourself that such an enterprise was clearly impossible."

"What? Explain yourself."

"I want to hear this account as dearly as any man alive," said Gunn.

"Mr. Macleod, you provided me with virtually every article of information I required to discern the truth of the matter save the name of the ship you found abandoned."

"But I told you that the ship was called *Polydeuces*!"

"Just so, sir. But that was clearly not the name of the ship you visited this morning. Did you not say that the ship you visited this morning was in excellent trim yet contained not even the smallest requisites for a transatlantic passage? How then had she made the passage, so ill-equipped and so little worn by the transit? It was not the same ship. It was impossible, you said, to remove the cargo in such a short time, and you were right."

Gunn laughed. "Then the ship at anchor is—"

"*Castor*. You did not tell me her name, but I swear I knew it immediately. Did not the name of the vessel you leased suggest

it to you? Polydeuces is the name the Romans called Pollux—"

"One of the twin sons of Jupiter by Leda, warriors in the Trojan war," said Barron, who knew his Pope if not his Greeks.

"And one of the twin stars we sail by, called the Gemini," added Gunn.

"Castor and Pollux, also known as the Dioscuri. So it was reasonable to ascertain that our *Polydeuces* had her own twin, and that she should be called *Castor*, especially as her owner was a man learned in the classics. Mr. Macleod, you made a great point of telling me how the Hudson's Bay Company operates in secret. Nobody, you said, could have known *Polydeuces* was in your service unless that someone had been in Hudson's Bay himself ere she departed, but in so reasoning, you erred. The most powerful moves in a game of chess, sir, are made early and secretly, so that the advantage of their positioning might not be discovered until the time comes to strike. And so it was. The owner, sir, the owner of the vessel, knew for what purpose, and by whom, she had been leased, and knew it months before her return. He planned his moves accordingly, and as far in advance. In short, Mr. Jonathan Eccles.

"It was his plan to replace *Polydeuces* with *Castor* at an-

chor, then set sail for the Baltic and sell his ill-gained fur for a fortune. In order for this stragem to succeed, however, it was a paramount necessity to be rid of Captain Nichols. The likeness of one ship to another was sufficient to fool you, but it would not have fooled *Polydeuces'* captain. Therefore, a pretext was created to draw him into a black alley, that he might be murdered and so not reveal the deception.

"But there was a weakness in Eccles' plan: after so arduous a passage, *Polydeuces* would not be ready to weigh anchor immediately upon her return to England. She required to be reprovisioned. That alone gave me hope we might not be too late."

"But how did you find Mr. Eccles?"

"A man in need of a fortune is usually a man steeped in debt. There could be but few places, few earths, if you please, where he could go to ground and not fear prosecution. The obvious burrow for a man needing easy access to the Thames is Whitefriars."

"Damn me, it was well done all around," said Macleod. "A toast

to you, sir." They drank to Treviscoe's health, and then Captain Gunn stood.

"I must return home," he said, "and face the wrath of Mrs. Gunn for today's adventure. But otherwise, what a happy outcome!"

As Gunn collected his sword and hat, Macleod frowned.

"Happy? Not for poor Ian Nichols." He sighed. Brightening, he reached into his pocket. "Here's your hostage, Mr. Treviscoe, safe as a mouse, and none the worse for wear. I don't parlay the French, you see."

"Philidor," said Treviscoe thoughtfully, accepting the proffered book. He put it carefully away and faced Macleod. "I have often thought that good books are like good friends, Mr. Macleod—they grow more precious with age, and you improve yourself through their company—but I see now what a poor conceit it is. A book is only a book, but a true friend will face death concerned only for the welfare and safety of those dear to him. A toast, sir, to the gallant Captain Nichols." They raised their glasses and drank.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

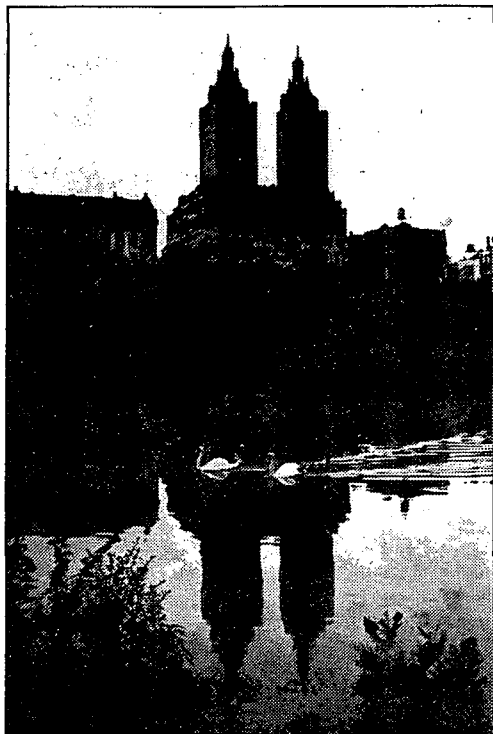


Photo by Rolan Fojardo

Double visions. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

A Death on the Ho Chi Minh Trail

David K.
Harford



A Death

Years later I would think about Vietnam and how, when I first arrived in-country, I imagined that every Vietnamese I encountered on the crowded streets of Pleiku,

each one plodding along country roads, all those bent toiling in the swampy ricefields, and even those hired to labor in the hot sun around the base camp for the Sixth Infantry Division (I envisioned them all as VC) might at any moment try to

take my head off. It never dawned on me that some might be friendly and some might even be neutral about the war being fought all around them.

I was tentative and uncertain the first few weeks, frightened by the unfamiliar ways and circumstances of the war, frightened of the sights and sounds and smells of the city and of the strange, impoverished lifestyle of the people whose country I had come to occupy. I seemed to have absolutely nothing in common with them but a common enemy, and they could easily be that enemy.

As I became acquainted with my surroundings, my fears abated, and I relaxed a bit, got bolder, was content doing my job, got to know the people better, and although the war was still the only common thread I felt I had with the Vietnamese, I could soon move among them with ease and confidence—not totally trusting, mind you, but more curious than afraid. At that point I even found myself really getting into my work, loving it when it took me far from the boring confines of base camp, sometimes out deep into the more hostile areas of the Central Highlands.

But then, like a giant bell curve, as my time to leave the country neared and I'd survived ten or eleven months, I reverted to being overly cautious and

fearful. I had made it through my year. Unlike too many others I'd seen, I was alive, and I intended to go home that way. This kept me, in the last days of my tour, staying as close to base camp as I could, letting the other guy go out to those places where I'd once ventured.

Nonetheless, I was riding high halfway through my tour and feeling bold the day Mitch called me from L.Z. Victoria, the forward firebase for the 3rd Brigade of the Sixth Infantry. He had someone he wanted me to talk to, he said. The man had a curious tale, and Mitch wasn't sure how to proceed, or if in fact he should proceed with an investigation at all.

It was this incident that made me realize that a common thread did indeed unite all of us in Vietnam, Vietnamese and GI's alike.

The three of us sat at a small table in the provost marshal's tent at L.Z. Victoria; I studied Pfc. Willard as he spoke. He gestured only a little, and his words were even and measured but not forceful.

"At first it just seemed odd, Mr. Hatchett. Too coincidental," he said to me. "That's why I decided to tell you the whole story and let you decide if the C.I.D. wants to look into this."

He glanced down at a paper

bag stuffed full of something. He'd brought the bag with him and kept it drawn in close to his body. I hadn't asked about its contents, preferring to let him tell his story first. But whatever was in that bag, I sensed, was part of his tale. He clutched it like it contained the crown jewels of England.

"I'd known Berkley all my life," Willard said tonelessly. "We were from the same small town in Kansas, went to the same high school. I dated his sister. We went to basic training together, and then we came down together on orders for over here. I'd taken advanced training at the Signal School in Aberdeen Proving Grounds after basic; Berkley took Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Polk. Over here he caught the second of the eleventh infantry, and I got headquarters company. We'd meet from time to time at the brigade mess hall over coffee and catch each other up on any hometown news. So when he told me last week he was worried that some of his own men might be after him and said that they could easily frag him out in the bush, I believed him. I mean, I knew him, Mr. Hatchett. He was scared, and not sure what to do about it. That night he's dead; KIA'd out in the bush, just like he worried about."

"Did he mention specifically

who in his unit might be after him and why?" I asked.

Fraggings—GI's intentionally killing other GI's—weren't all that common, but when it happened, it was usually a hard-driving officer or noncom who got the dubious honor bestowed upon him, usually during the heat and confusion of a firefight so it would go unnoticed.

Willard folded his hands atop the bag. They were large hands, calloused, the hands of a Kansas farmboy, I imagined. His hair was straw-colored, his face freckled. "He mentioned no names, but since it happened while he was out on patrol, it's got to be one of the guys he went out with. It was only a six-man short-range recon patrol."

"You know where the 2/11th is?" I asked Mitch.

"Oh yeah. I sure do. It's not a full company, only a small detachment. But man oh man, the trouble." I noted the disgust in Mitch's voice, and I knew we'd be discussing the 2/11th in fuller detail after Willard left.

"The only thing Berkley said," Willard continued, "about why they might be out to get him was that 'they were up to no good again, and it was getting worse,' he said, and he didn't like it. That's how he put it. But like I said, he didn't know which way to turn. He wasn't

real hot on going to his CO, I guess."

Mitch muttered, "That's understandable."

"Okay," I said. "Berkley goes out on patrol with these guys, some of whom were up to no good, and he comes back dead. Can I assume they got into some kind of firefight, then?"

"They got into something. We were monitoring it up at Brigade Headquarters. I could hear them yelling in the radio that they'd been ambushed or something or made contact somehow and were falling back. They weren't supposed to make contact, but sometimes you can't help it. Someone yelled to give them support. They wanted mortars. They wanted flares. They wanted out of there. They already had one KIA, their point man, they said, and they were bringing him in. Cover them. Over the radio I could hear men yelling in the background and 16's going off. It sounded like a real frenzy. It didn't last long because they were already breaking contact and were only a few clicks, a few thousand yards, outside our perimeter. It was then I learned the patrol was from the 2/11th and that Berkley was the KIA point man."

"When was this?" I asked.

"About one in the morning last Tuesday."

"Besides what he told you, is

there anything else that makes you think someone did him during that firefight?"

Willard squinted, considering the seriousness of the question, then said slowly, "I wouldn't have thought—" He fidgeted. "Let's say I would have been only suspicious, given what Berkley had said—I mean, killing one of your own is too much to comprehend—so it would have weighed out evenly in me; the weight of that monstrous act against the weight of my suspicions. You know what I mean? I would've probably left the country suspicious but wouldn't've done anything about it if I hadn't gone to Grave Registration. That tipped the scales—ah man, him dying is going to rip his mom apart." Pfc. Willard twisted the edges of the bag, rolled them and unrolled them.

"What happened at Grave Registration?"

He opened the brown bag. "I got permission to go see him the next day. I guess to say goodbye, maybe take something of his back with me, back to his family. I even thought about calling his mom from here. You know, let me tell her. It might ease things. But I couldn't bring myself to do that." Willard drew a stabilizing breath because his voice was beginning to quaver.

"I was going to ask for his Zip-po. He'd shown it to me the day

before—he had had it engraved with his name and unit—but I couldn't find it among his personal effects, which is kind of odd because he always carried it. He smoked like a chimney. I always told him his smoking was going to kill him." Willard snickered bitterly at the irony. "Anyway, I figured the lighter got lost when they were bringing him in, probably fell out of his pocket.

"They already had Berkley laid out, stripped to his shorts. I could see where he took a burst full across the chest, probably killing him instantly. One shot high in the shoulder broke his shoulder. But most of the shots were across his chest and stomach. They'd cleaned the blood off some. His fatigue shirt was lying on the floor in a heap. When I saw his name tag and knew it was his shirt, I picked it up.

"Suddenly I was crying, holding the bloody fatigue shirt he wore—crying for him, crying for me, crying for his mom, crying for all of us, I guess—and I must have been more dazed and in shock than I realized because when I left I was still carrying his shirt wadded up in my fists."

He reached into the bag, pulled out an army jungle fatigue shirt, and held it up by the shoulders. I could read BERKLEY on the name tag above the pock-

et. I could also see Berkley was an Sp/4. The shirt was badly soiled with dried blood.

Standing up and stepping back a bit, Willard held the shirt so I could view it better from a distance. "It wasn't until the next day that I noticed it," he said, never taking his eyes off me, watching me scrutinize the bloodstained shirt.

Mitch was watching me, too. Other than the large amount of blood caked down the front, I saw nothing particularly unusual about it. "You noticed what?" I asked.

Mitch pushed his chair back, rising.

"No bullet holes, Hatch," he said. "There's isn't a bullet hole in that shirt. There's blood all down the front, but that's it."

Mitch steered the jeep down the dirt road inside L.Z. Victoria. Along the perimeter, inside the coils of razor wire and barbed wire, sandbagged bunkers had been erected, every fourth one a towering command bunker. We stopped in front of one of them.

"Each unit is responsible for manning a section of bunkers twenty-four hours a day," Mitch said, pushing his OD—olive drab—baseball cap back. "The 2/11th has Sector Blue, these five bunkers you see here. Cut

through the rolls of wire right in front of Sector Blue's command bunker is a path and a gate allowing patrols to go in and out of the perimeter at night, hopefully unseen."

I noted the path and a gate of sorts. I could see trip flares tied along the path and at least two Claymores set up and pointed down the path to protect it.

"A while back I got tipped off that the 2/11th bunker guards, led by one Staff Sergeant Reynolds, were sneaking Vietnamese prostitutes in through that gate at night onto the L.Z. and into their bunkers, if you can believe that."

"That's nuts." I said, astounded not only by the audacity but by the carelessness and stupidity of the act as well.

"Well, I caught them with four whores. I turned the women over to the National Police, who probably took their turn at them before letting them go, and I wrote up Sergeant Reynolds and his cohorts. It's bad enough that some of them were drunk, some probably smoked up, and two were sleeping on guard duty, but to open those gates and let God-knows-who in—well."

"Were they court-martialed?"

"They were reprimanded. I think Reynolds lost some pay, a mere slap on the hand. But understand, their CO at the time, Lieutenant Macy, was a wimp.

No backbone; scared to death of his own men even. I heard his fear got worse the closer he got to going home. I had it put to me that Sergeant Reynolds actually ran the outfit. Maybe that's an exaggeration, but it probably isn't too far off. All Macy wanted was to leave. He finally got his wish. He was sent home last week. They just got a new CO, so maybe there'll be some changes for the better."

He put the jeep in gear. "I've had nothing but trouble with that unit since they got here. We're forever catching them in off-limits bars and whorehouses in Phu Bien, in unauthorized uses of army vehicles, drunk and disorderly. And most probably some blackmarketing is going on. Drugs, almost certainly. It's a rogue unit, I'll tell you. It's like a big party to them."

"About Berkley's shirt," I said as we bounced along the dusty road, "any possibility he was out on point not wearing a shirt?"

"Not from what I've been told."

"Oh?"

"After Willard showed me the shirt, I went to see an infantry captain friend of mine. Like you, I was thinking maybe Berkley had his shirt off when he was hit, then someone put it on him before they took him to Grave Registration. So I asked the captain if he or any of his men ever

went shirtless on patrol at night. He laughed. No way, he said. First, the insects would eat you alive. Also, it's usually dark out there. I mean, these guys aren't carrying flashlights or anything, so they're all the time getting slapped by branches and scraped by thorns. Lots of guys wear flak jackets over their shirts. That's when I decided to call you."

"But he must have had his shirt off when he was shot. Unless the VC have a new kind of bullet. Maybe it was unbuttoned under his flak jacket, if he wore one. That might explain it."

"It wouldn't explain the shoulder wound. A flak jacket is sleeveless, like a vest. I told you it was curious, a real puzzler. Here we are. Maybe these guys can clear it up."

We pulled into the 2/11th's detachment area. As I glanced around at the infantry unit's tents, their sandbagged walls built four feet high up the sides for protection against incoming mortars and rockets, I saw three men busy painting the wooden latrine, four others washing and polishing the company's jeeps and three-quarter ton trucks, and a long line of soldiers being marched through the area picking up litter and cigarette butts.

The sides of the mess tent had been lifted to let fresh air through. Inside, I could see a half dozen men in white aprons

mopping the wood floors, washing and polishing things.

"This is a switch," Mitch said, smiling slightly. "I might get to like this new CO of theirs. Look at how they've cleaned the place up."

As we approached the CO's tent, we could hear someone inside getting chewed out.

"Sergeant Reynolds," a voice growled, "I don't care how Lieutenant Macy ran things. Things are going to be run a whole lot different around here from now on. According to the inventory I've taken, we're missing about fifty cases of Lerps; we're missing two radios; none of the vehicles have spare tires. I haven't even gotten into the armament yet. The men's sleeping quarters are a mess.

"There'll be an inspection tomorrow at 0900. And you'd better start hunting around for those starlight scopes. I want to see them on my desk tomorrow morning. Am I clear on that, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir, Captain Boggs. You are very clear. Shall I steal a couple of starlight scopes off another unit, sir?"

"That'll be enough, Reynolds. Just find them."

We pushed through the flaps and entered the command tent. "Who are you?" Boggs asked, glaring at us like a hungry animal looking for something else

to chew on and we looked good. Then his expression eased. "Oh yes, the MP's. Someone called and said you were coming over. I'm Captain Boggs, the new CO here."

"I'm Mr. Hatchett with the C.I.D., and this is Mr. Mitchley, the provost marshal investigator for the MP's here on Victoria."

Still in a rigid stance Reynolds swiveled his head slowly until his eyes fell directly on Mitch, then on me.

"Sergeant," Captain Boggs said, "these men want to talk to you." He brushed past me on his way out of the tent. "You can use this tent if you want, Mr. Hatchett. I'll get the others."

He glanced back at Reynolds. "Sergeant, who was with you on that patrol last week, the night, ah—what was his name, the one killed while you were out on recon?"

"Berkley, sir. Sp/4 Berkley."

Reynolds was staring straight ahead again, not looking at any of us. A bit of blush was leaving his cheeks.

"And the others would be Watson, Thiel, and Jefferson, sir. Collins, too, but he's on R&R at Cam Ranh Bay. He should be back in a few days. Want me to get them, sir?"

"I'll get them. You stay here. I just took over last Wednesday," Boggs explained to Mitch and

me, "so I don't know a lot of my men yet."

I nodded.

When Boggs had gone, Staff Sergeant Reynolds immediately relaxed.

"Boy, am I glad to be getting out of here," he said. "What a monster he is."

"Where you going?" I said, hoping to keep it informal. "Home?"

"The next best thing to home. Fort Dix, New Jersey. I've got orders to become a drill instructor for basic trainees. I was born and raised only ten miles from Dix. Hot damn. Good hit. I can live right at home." He took a seat at Captain Boggs's desk. Very bold he was, unafraid, it seemed, of further reprimands.

He shuffled through some of Boggs's papers and finally held up the inventory list. "How the hell am I supposed to know who ate more Lerps than they were supposed to? If the mess hall put out better meals, the guys wouldn't be eating the Lerps. How am I supposed to know where those starlight scopes are?" He tossed the paper aside. "Man, two weeks and I'm out of here. It cannot get here fast enough."

Lerps—LRRP really, but pronounced Lerp—stood for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, but what it referred to was food, freeze-dried food to be exact,

very tasty food infantry units took out with them when they went on patrols. The meal packages, the Lerps, weighed less than the old C-rations, and by merely heating water over a lighted hunk of C-4 explosive and pouring the hot water into the freeze-dried packages, hot meals could be made in the bush far more efficiently and quicker and better tasting than ever before. Lerps also had a great commercial value, so they often ended up on the black market.

Starlight scopes were night vision equipment, a telescopelike device that allowed you to see at night by drawing on the light of the stars or the moon. They didn't work very well on moonless nights or on heavily clouded ones, but they were handy pieces of equipment. It was hard to imagine how a unit could lose two.

Sergeant Reynolds turned his attention to Mitch and me. "What is it about the night Berkley was killed that you want to know?"

"I'd prefer to wait for the others," I said. "Were you in charge that night?"

His furrowed his brow. He seemed young for a staff sergeant. "I'm in charge every night, Mr., Mr.—"

"Hatchett." I said. A big boy, too. Probably played football in

high school before joining the army.

"Mr. Hatchett." Then he muttered harshly, "Used to be in charge anyway," and glared outside in Boggs's direction.

The tent flap opened, and three men, two whites and a black, shuffled into the tent. Jefferson, the black enlisted man, had obviously been one of the men washing vehicles because his fatigues were soapy and soaked. Thiel, a small man with black hair and bushy eyebrows, had OD paint on his hands. It was hard to determine what chore Watson had been involved in, but he was a big blond kid who wore his fatigues skin tight.

I made Sergeant Reynolds relinquish the chair behind Captain Boggs's desk, and I sat in it. Mitch sat on the edge of the desk. The four men we were about to question stood in a line in front of us, their arms crossed behind their backs.

I spoke to them as a group but tried to watch each man individually.

"Last week out on patrol you guys ran into some unfriendlies and got into a brief firefight. Sp/4 Berkley, a member of your patrol, was killed."

"That's not exactly right," Sergeant Reynolds said.

The others stared down at the dirt floor; only Reynolds looked at Mitch and me.

"Would you care to correct me, then, sergeant?" I said.

"Yes, sir. Berkley was not killed in our firefight with the VC per se. Berkley was already dead. Actually, Berkley was the reason we got into the firefight. If he had stayed out of sight like he was supposed to, he might still be here today. May I clarify, Mr. Hatchett?"

The others, except for Thiel, had raised their heads and were now watching Reynolds. "Please do," I told him.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Our job that night," he said, "like the many other nights we went out on those recons, was to set up along a well-traveled trail about three clicks out. That's three thousand yards, give or take. We were only to monitor any movement along the trail by the VC. We were not to engage the enemy. Understand, Mr. Hatchett, this brigade is set up in part to monitor movement all along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But the Ho Chi Minh Trail is not a trail like the Appalachian Trail is a trail. It's a whole system of roads and trails from Hanoi to Saigon, and the trail we were monitoring is just one small part of it. We'd done this quite a few times before, whenever orders came down from brigade."

Sergeant Reynolds drew out a

cigarette, offered the pack to all of us, and continued. "Berkley was on point, maybe fifty yards ahead of us. He was to wait for us out of sight at a spot where the trail forked. Suddenly we heard a burst of gunfire ahead. I tried to raise Berkley but couldn't, so we crept forward to find out what had happened to him. About the time we saw him, lying at the fork, we began taking fire from VC's."

"Heavy fire," Watson added, nudging Reynolds. "What would you say, sarge, a dozen VC?"

"Probably that many at least. Like us, a small patrol." Reynolds drew on his cigarette. "We returned fire, of course, and moved in to get Berkley out of there. I assumed he was dead, leastways he wasn't moving, but no way was I going to leave him there." He paused and looked at Jefferson.

"Go on," I said. Thiel caught my attention. He was the only one of the four soldiers who didn't seem to want to look directly at Mitch or me or the others and didn't seem anxious to contribute. Instead he scowled at the dirt floor and busied his hands by picking dried paint off them.

"I had Jefferson here on the horn calling for mortars to cover us when we made our way back to Victoria," Reynolds continued. "I was finally able to make

it to where Berkley was and drug him back out of fire. These guys kept the gooks busy while I was doing that. Turned out we didn't need mortars."

"So you four and Collins were together when Berkley was ahead on point? You're fortunate no one else was killed."

"We had plenty of cover. The jungle's pretty thick in there," Jefferson explained.

"How far did you have to drag Berkley?"

"Only fifty feet or so, to where the trail bent a bit. About that far, wasn't it, Watson? Then I threw him over my shoulder and carried him back to Victoria while these guys covered our retreat. But the VC weren't following us. I think they were as surprised by the encounter as we were."

"It's very commendable getting Berkley out of there."

"I wasn't going to leave him, Mr. Hatchett. He was in *my* command, and he was a good friend. I wouldn't want to be left out there, alive or dead. He was a great guy."

The others, except Thiel, nodded agreement.

"How long did the firefight last?" I asked. "Thiel? Any idea how long?"

Thiel snapped his head up, surprised. "Ah, I-I-I'm sorry. What?"

"About ten minutes. Maybe

twenty," Sergeant Reynolds answered.

"About that," Thiel muttered.

"Seemed like a lifetime," Jefferson added.

"I'll bet it did," I said. What they'd just described was a common firefight, however short it was. I'd heard nothing earth-shattering or unusual in their account, so I shuffled some papers on Captain Boggs's desk, leaned back so I could see the entire group better, and asked the question I wanted answered most. I directed it at Sergeant Reynolds.

"When you finally reached Berkley lying there dead on the trail, you say you dragged him back fifty feet or so." Reynolds watched my lips intently as if he were reading each word as it came out of my mouth. "How did you drag him? I mean, where did you grab him to drag him?"

Without hesitation Reynolds said, "At first I grabbed him under the armpits. But his shoulder was broken and it was flopping in the shattered socket and hard to get ahold of, so I reached down and grabbed him by the shirt. Like this."

Reynolds stepped behind Jefferson, reached over Jefferson's shoulders with both arms, and grabbed handfuls of fatigue material in the area of Jefferson's shirt pockets.

"And that's how you got him out? Holding onto his shirt?"

"Yes, sir," Reynolds said.

"Was his shirt buttoned?"

"I suppose so. I believe so. Yes. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Steel pot?"

"He wore a slop hat." Reynolds appeared puzzled momentarily, then recovered. "Boots, too," he said. "Berkley had his boots on in case that's the next question about how we dress."

Thiel was still looking pretty sour, but the others smiled at Sergeant Reynolds' smart-aleck remark.

I ignored it, but privately I enjoyed it because he had inadvertently given me a little more cover to disguise what we were really after. "Were his boots laced?" I asked.

"Hell, no. They were untied, and he was always tripping over them. Of course his boots were laced. His shirt was buttoned. His hat was on. His—"

"Was he wearing a flak jacket?"

"No. Berkley didn't like them. Too confining, he said. They don't stop bullets anyway, and Berkley always said that while your upper torso might get protected from shrapnel, your groin and face are exposed. He never wore a flak jacket."

"So you grabbed him by his shirt and dragged him back?"

"That's correct, Mr. Hatchett."

He ground his cigarette out on the floor with his boot. "Why all the questions about how he was dressed? Is the army becoming fashion-conscious these days?"

With grim, stone-faced expressions, every man including Thiel was watching me, awaiting the answer. Apparently this time none of them saw anything funny in Reynolds' attempt at humor.

I sat forward in the chair and studied them. Finally I said, "It's something we have to do from time to time. This just happens to be one of those times."

I thought it was a great answer—truthful, in a vague sort of way.

After the session, in which everyone basically verified Reynolds' account of the firefight, we followed the four men out of the tent. I kept my eye on Thiel as the group meandered towards the mess hall. I could tell they were talking fiercely among themselves. Once out of earshot they stopped suddenly, and I watched Sergeant Reynolds spin Thiel around, speaking to him sharply, stabbing a finger into Thiel's face as he spoke.

"Shouldn't we have interviewed them all separately?" Mitch asked as we watched the foursome enter the mess tent.

"We could have done it that way, yes. And we still can. I

wanted to view them as a group first and see how they interacted. Besides, if something happened out there, you can bet they've got their story straight. These infantry units are close-knit groups. But remind me to call the C.I.D. office at base camp sometime soon. I have to make a few arrangements."

Mitch nodded. "Interesting about the shirt, wasn't it?"

"If Berkley was killed by VC in that firefight with his shirt on, that leaves us with those new kind of bullets the VC must have."

"Or," Mitch said, "maybe the VC tackled him, opened his shirt, shot him, then buttoned his shirt again."

Although I chuckled, I added, "You might be closer to the truth than you realize."

Captain Boggs was approaching us from across the company area.

"Where to from here?" Mitch wanted to know.

Before I could answer, Boggs spoke, "You done?"

"Yes, we are," I said. "Thank you."

"Anything I can do to help, let me know."

"There is one thing. Tomorrow morning after your inspection, let's say at 1100 hours, would you bring Thiel up to the command bunker in Sector Blue?

I'm going to need him for a few hours."

"Just Thiel? Not the others?"

"Just Thiel. And don't say anything to anyone, even to Thiel, about where you're taking him."

"Can do," Captain Boggs said.

"What do you have planned?" Mitch asked.

I donned my baseball cap. "Tomorrow you, me, Thiel, and a detachment of MP's, combat ready, are going out to where Berkley was killed. It seems Thiel might be the weak point in the group and the one we now want to separate from the others. I want him to show us just where on the Ho Chi Minh Trail Sp/4 Berkley was killed. I agree with Willard. I don't think Berkley was killed by the VC. At least not in that firefight."

The Village

The jungle foliage on both sides of the path we followed was so thick hardly any sunlight reached the ground, giving me the sensation we were walking in perpetual twilight.

The path was a well-traveled one and wide enough that we could walk two abreast on it. I'd sent two MP's on ahead as point men even though our chances of stumbling on the enemy in mid-

morning so close to the brigade firebase were slight. The VC loved the night.

Two MP's brought up the rear, five others were with Mitch and me and Thiel. But all of us were armed with 16's and M-79 grenade launchers just in case.

Earlier, when we met Thiel at the command bunker and I told him that I wanted him to take me to the spot where Berkley was killed, his only response had been a pained, twisted look and a slight nod. Then he mumbled a profanity I didn't quite understand.

We hadn't gone very far down the trail when the MP's on point radioed that they had reached the fork in the path and would wait for us. But when we finally caught up with them, Thiel said it was the wrong fork. "It forks again up ahead," he said. "This path here—" he indicated an equally well-traveled path to the left—"goes into a small village somewhere over there." He motioned with his head in a generally easterly direction.

We moved on, deeper into the jungle, where the moist heat, trapped air, and mildew made it feel and smell like we were pushing through a large sun-steamed terrarium dripping with condensation.

Thirty minutes later, a couple of thousand yards down the

path, we congregated at the spot where Berkley died.

"Somewhere right in here is where he was lying," Thiel said, pointing at the confluence of two trails. He studied the earth and kicked at some leaves and debris. "In fact, here's some of his blood."

Sure enough, among some dead leaves I could see large blotches of dried blood that the ants and flies hadn't gotten to yet.

Thiel sat down beside the path, leaned against a tree, put his head between his knees, and rocked his torso slowly, rhythmically.

"Where does this trail lead?" I asked of the left fork.

"The right one goes on and on to I don't know where. Hanoi, maybe," Thiel answered. "The left one intersects with another trail up ahead that eventually also leads to that village I told you about back there. It's that trail we were to monitor. The VC were coming up the right fork when Berkley encountered them."

"How far away is the village?"

"A couple of clicks maybe. You can also get to it by vehicle, but you have to drive almost into Phu Bien and then take a dirt road back to it."

I concentrated on studying the thick broadleaf foliage growing

profusely where the firefight had taken place.

Things weren't quite right—something was missing.

An MP called to me and pointed at the ground. There I spied three spent M-16 shell casings scattered off the path. "Aren't many empty casings," I said to Thiel, "for a fifteen, twenty minute firefight. How many rounds you think you guys got off before dragging Berkley out of here?"

"Hundreds, maybe. A thousand, who knows?" Thiel said, his head still down between his legs. "The VC, or civilians, come along and pick up any spent cartridges, Mr. Hatchett. They can either reload them and use them on us, or they sell them for the brass. That's why you don't see many lying around. They must have overlooked those there." He raised his head and stared across the path at me. "Why am I here with you, Mr. Hatchett?" he asked. "Why are we doing this? The C.I.D. doesn't normally do this. Berkley is dead. Berkley was killed. In a firefight. Here. By VC. That's all there is to it."

Again I scanned the heavy growth of trees, vines, and undergrowth at the hub of the firefight. In the mountain region of northwestern Pennsylvania where I come from, the forest grows thick and dense, although not as thick as the steamy jungle, and I was thinking of that

forest back home when I suddenly realized what was missing. I pressed Thiel further.

"So Berkley was lying here, where this blood is. Reynolds reached him while you guys were firing at VC, who were firing at you—what? A thousand rounds fired all told, you said?"

"I don't know," Thiel said. "I don't know. I wasn't counting rounds fired. There were a lot of rounds fired. It could be a thousand. Twelve of them, five of us, each firing a couple or three clips; each clip twenty rounds. Maybe more, even."

"And you saw Reynolds dragging Berkley back, is that right? He was dragging him by his shirt? Where were you?"

"Somewhere right in here. I—Mr. Hatchett, I don't know how many firefights you've been in, but you lose all senses during one. Things get confusing. You are scared out of your wits. Your only thought is to lay down as much firepower as you can, as quick as you can. Understand? Your only intention is to get out of there. Alive. That's what I and the others were doing while Reynolds was dragging Berkley."

I figured the time might be ripe to give Thiel something to chew on, something to take back to his buddies, something to make him a little jumpy. I'd seen enough. Or rather, not

enough, and that's what bothered me. "You're right," I said. "I've never been in a firefight like this. But there's something that isn't quite right here."

"What's not quite right here?" Thiel's voice rose in impatience and anger and disbelief. "What's not right here, Mr. Hatchett? Berkley was lying right there. Look at his blood. You found some shell casings. What's not right? Are the trees not growing right? That path not right? What's not right?"

I leveled a look at him to let him know I was dead serious about what I was about to tell him. "For a small area of thick jungle where a thousand rounds, maybe more, maybe less, were fired, I find it odd that there's not one tree scarred, not one branch nicked or broken by a bullet, not one leaf stripped. Could you tell me, Thiel, how a thousand rounds could be fired through this thick growth in this small area and not *one* of them hit so much as a twig? What kind of bullets were you and the VC using anyway?"

Thiel stared at me for several moments, mouth agape, face flushed a bit, maybe from the heat. His eyes skipped over the nearby branches. The corners of his mouth twitched nervously. Then he put his head back on his knees. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

I turned to Mitch and the MP's. "Let's head back," I said. "Tomorrow afternoon we'll pay a visit to that village."

"I suppose you're going to want me to go with you then, too," Thiel said, rising to his feet, dusting himself off.

"No," I said. "We'll go alone from here on out."

The birthday party that evening in Military Intelligence's company area was in full swing by the time I arrived, after making a call to the C.I.D. in base camp to set things in motion there.

Because part of MI's job was to interrogate POW's and it was part of the MP's job to guard POW's, MI and MP units were often set up right next to each other. The small detachment of intelligence personnel on L.Z. Victoria included birthday boy Tom Fingers, the commanding officer Mr. Sommers, and three others. These men, as well as Mitch and two MP's, sat in lawn chairs outside MI's command tent drinking beer. Tom Fingers was well into his cups by the time I got there.

There were times in Vietnam when you'd never know a war was going on, and this was one of those times: a bunch of guys off duty, sitting around in the cooling evening under a silver

sky, drinking beer, joking, and barbecuing ham steaks.

"Mitch tells me you're interested in Bravo 457," Mr. Sommers said after I'd gotten comfortable in a lawn chair, beer in hand.

"Bravo 457?"

"That's what we call that village you're going to tomorrow. It's got a name, but it's easier to refer to it as Bravo 457."

"You're familiar with it, then?" I said.

Sommers, a recent law school graduate before being drafted into the army, still had a boyish, preppy look to him even in his jungle fatigues and short GI haircut. Like Mitch and me, he wore no rank insignia, and I guessed he was either a lieutenant or, like me, a warrant officer.

He stirred in his lawn chair, crossing a leg. "We had a great informant in Bravo 457. We'd pop in from time to time, talk with the villagers—individually, of course, so that no one else in the village would know who was passing us info about VC or NVA movement through the area. Most of the population—women, old men, and children—aren't very reliable and are uncooperative, but we managed to find one good one there. Well, he used to be reliable, anyway."

"The others are VC sympathizers?"

Sommers scrunched his face.

"Hard to tell. They could be sympathizers; they could be VC. Could be, too, they just don't want to be involved with us or the VC. They like our money, mind you, but all in all I get the impression they want to be left alone. What's your interest in the village, Hatch?"

"I want to look around. I want to see if it's the kind of place a guy could kick back in, you know, relax a bit, maybe take his shirt off."

"I'm not sure I understand that, but I'm thinking, if you don't mind, me, Fingers, and one other, plus our interpreter, will tag along. It's been a while since we've been out there, and I'm getting a little worried about our boy."

"Oh?"

"The last couple of months or so he's been inaccurate in his information. It used to be that we could bank on it. At least, we've dished out a lot of money for information. But lately we'll have reports of VC movement along a trail that leads into the village, yet our informant will tell us there've been no VC through. I'm fearing he may have been turned. We haven't used him in a while."

"Is your other source reliable, you think?" I asked.

"It better be. It's an American infantry unit. They send recons

out whenever we request it through brigade."

"You mean units like the 2/11th infantry?"

"I can't tell you that. But that might be close. Do you mind if we go in with you tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," I said. "I'd welcome it."

Sommers tipped his beer can my way. "Excellent. If you want information about anything in the village without really asking it, I think you'll find Mr. Fingers has some special talents."

I looked over at Fingers, who was staggering to the beer cooler. Merely standing up seemed to be giving him some difficulty, so it was hard to imagine what his special talents might be.

"We'll drive out tomorrow after lunch," Sommers said.

"I'd prefer to walk if you don't mind. There's a path from the perimeter leading into the village that I want to look at, too."

Sommers gulped down the last of his beer and watched as Fingers came towards him carrying full cans of beer for the rest of us. "Walk, huh? We can do that. We can walk, can't we, Fingers?"

Fingers swayed. "Just barely, sir," he slurred. "Just barely."

The trail to the village offered nothing unusual. It wasn't unlike the trail we'd been on the day before, well-traveled and

wide, except this one seemed to go downhill more.

It was midafternoon by the time we reached the village. Sommers convinced me that taking a full contingent of MP's with us might be unwise. It was intimidating to the villagers, he said. But fear not, he added, he always had a platoon or two of infantry positioned about a mile down the road towards Phu Bien, just in case we should run into problems. They could be there in a couple of minutes if we needed them.

Only a half dozen ramshackle huts made up the back-jungle village. Most stood in a row, but one hut was built back a bit near the rim of the jungle. The houses were constructed from large pieces of broken and splintered plywood, misshapen tin, thick corrugated cardboard, and whatever else could be salvaged out of American garbage dumps. The air was choked with gray woodsmoke from cookfires, and a strong stench—a thick, musty, pungent odor of animal and human feces, garbage, and unbathed people—burned my nostrils.

About two dozen peasants occupied the village, and they hardly lifted their heads when we emerged from the trail and stepped into the clearing the village occupied.

Of the half dozen huts, the one

sitting by itself immediately sparked my curiosity. It looked recently built, yet there was no sign of life around it. Because it was erected from what appeared to be new sheets of plywood, it seemed too new, too well-built, as if it didn't belong there.

And of the couple of dozen old men and women stooped over cookfires or standing in the open doorways of their huts, some clutching small children, the frail old woman sobbing with soul-deep, agonizing cries was the hardest to ignore.

She wailed in long, high-pitched sounds to no one as she squatted in the doorway grasping her midsection with one hand, the other hand flailing limply in front of her, her bony fingers clawing air as if she was trying to grab handfuls of something that wasn't there.

When the six of us walked into the village, the crying old woman for some reason picked me as the focus of her attention, or at least it seemed that way. She'd wail mournfully and claw the air, then raise her head, wipe her tearstained face with a dirty sleeve, and watch me for a moment or two before breaking into a renewed burst of sorrow. Then she'd watch me some more. She seemed to be interested in no one but me as Mitch and I moved towards the farthest hut.

Mr. Sommers, the interpreter, and another MI personnel talked with an old man off to the side out of hearing of the others. Fingers more or less meandered around the village grounds looking like he was lost and didn't know what to do about it. I was guessing he was hung over from the night before and still groggy. He'd been pretty quiet on the long walk out, sweating profusely.

Mitch and I stood outside the door of the new hut. The plywood was American, and it *was* almost brand-new, not the kind you'd pull from a dump. The door was closed but not locked, so I pushed it partly open with my foot. Inside I could see a large front room with a dirt floor and a long plywood counter running along one wall. On the opposite side were two chairs and a small table. Two doors led to other rooms built behind the main room. I saw no cooking utensils, no personal objects, no religious statues, no mats for sitting on the floor, no dining area, nothing domestic. I got the impression the hut I was looking into wasn't someone's living quarters but a place of business—a new barroom and whorehouse like the many used in Phu Bien.

When I glanced over my shoulder across the village grounds through the thin, gray wisps of

woodsmoke, I was surprised to see Sommers and the interpreter walking towards us, apparently already done with their many interviews. Sommers wiped his hot brow with his sleeve, looking very glum, and stole a look at the old woman, who was still studying me, craning her neck to see what I was doing, and still crying.

When I stepped into the hut, the door didn't open all the way, so I looked to see what might be holding it. Fresh dirt was sprinkled heavily along the floor directly behind it. I pushed harder, scraping the dirt back until the door opened wide.

Inside, I looked behind the counter, where I found a row of washed glasses, an open box of cocktail stirrers, and a container that still had water in it from melted ice, but no booze. Two kerosene lamps were also behind the bar.

I made my way to the two back rooms, but by this time I was pretty sure I knew what I'd find in each room—beds.

Sure enough, each room had two wooden beds built against opposite walls. A thin mattress, a dingy sheet, and a small pillow made up the bedding for each. A curtain fabricated from a blanket hung on a wire so it could be drawn in front of each bed for privacy. A small nightstand held a metal washbasin with a rag

and towel for cleaning up, and hooks for hanging clothes were nailed into the walls. It wasn't hard to visualize a jungle fatigue shirt hanging from one of those hooks.

I checked all the rooms for anything to indicate that American soldiers had been there—cigarette butts, discarded clothing, empty food containers, beer cans, American magazines—but I saw nothing. The place was empty except for the bar supplies and the sparse furnishings.

I stepped from the coolness of the hut into the bright sunlight, where I almost knocked down an old man jabbering Vietnamese to MI's interpreter. Sommers and Tom Fingers stood nearby, listening. I was surprised when the interpreter said to me, "He wants to talk to you. He wants to talk with C.I.D."

"He does?" I was amazed the old man knew the difference between Mr. Sommers and his MI group and the C.I.D. But then I remembered that the old woman had also picked me out of the group. I looked over at her. Still squatting, she'd stopped crying and was watching us.

"How does he know who I am?" I asked the interpreter.

He put the question to the old man, who gave a quick reply. The interpreter told me, "He says Mr. Tiger tell him."

"Whooooa, stop right there,"

Sommers exclaimed suddenly, reaching over and jerking me by the shoulder. He led me with Tom Fingers and Mitch off to the side, out of earshot of the villagers. The interpreter stayed with the old man. The old woman watched our little conference. "You know who Tiger is?" Sommers asked.

I shook my head. "I'm still trying to figure out how the old man knew who *I* was."

"They all know who you are," Fingers said. "And why you're here."

I got the immediate impression there were things going on around me I didn't know about, and I was beginning to feel left out. "How do you know that?"

Sommers explained. "I told you Fingers has some special talents. One of them is that he speaks fluent Vietnamese. His job on these little outings is to meander around the village while we're interviewing villagers. You'd be surprised what folks say to each other when they think someone can't understand them. Not even our interpreter knows that Fingers knows their language. We've picked up a lot of useful information that way."

I was gaining new respect for Tom Fingers. "What did you hear about me?" I asked him.

"That they know you're C.I.D. here to look into the death of an

American soldier killed in this village."

"Up until now I wasn't sure it did happen here. Did anyone say it actually occurred here? Did anyone see it happen?" Oh, hope against hope.

"No. Just that you knew it did."

I didn't know any such thing, but it was looking more and more promising. "Thiel," I said mostly to myself. "He told the others I was coming out here. He's the only one who could have. And they told—so, who is Mr. Tiger?" I directed this at Sommers.

"Bigtime. Bigtime VC. At least so we've always suspected. Tiger's his nickname. He's a successful Vietnamese businessman, something of a hometown hero in Phu Bien. And if what we know is true, he is very high up in the Vietcong organization. He's the enemy, Hatch. Trust me."

"Do these villagers know Tiger is VC?" I asked.

"Probably not," Sommers said. "To them he's a businessman, a countryman, a hero, a source of income, too, probably. He would not announce to these villagers he was VC any more than he'd tell us. But this is the first I've heard of his being involved in anything out here. Knowing what we know now, though, it fits in."

"What do you mean?"

"Our informant is dead, Hatch. The kid was dragged off by the VC a few nights ago and killed, hacked to death. That's his mother over there crying her heart out, poor soul."

I glanced back at the woman and saw she was gone, probably into her hut.

"Her parents were killed by the French when they were here fighting this same war. Her husband was killed either by Americans or VC during the Tet offensive when the VC tried to overrun Phu Bien. Caught in the crossfire. Just an innocent civilian in the wrong place at the wrong time. And now her son is killed by the VC. Would you care to venture a guess at whose side she might be on?"

"No one's, I would imagine," I said.

"Exactly," Sommers said.

"I've got to find out what this old man knows."

"Be careful. Pretend you know nothing about Tiger. He's just a businessman. We want to keep it that way. And the information is probably going to cost you. That's why he came to you."

"How much?"

"Depends on how hungry he is. If you need money, I have some here." Sommers pulled his wallet out and stuffed a hundred piasters into my hand. "Try not to pay any more than that."

That's probably six months' wages for this guy."

At first I was hesitant about paying for information, paying a possible witness for his testimony. MI could get away with that; they could use bought info. I couldn't. On the other hand, if he could give me something concrete—names, dates, or perhaps he was an actual eyewitness—I could go from there. I couldn't pass it up. I'd be further ahead with purchased information I couldn't use than without it. It sure beat tromping around in the jungle looking under leaves for leads.

Turned out the information wasn't all that good. Not totally bad, mind you, but he wouldn't be a star witness in any court-martial, that was for sure.

The old man was smoking something in a pipe that smelled like oily rags burning, and he had his own particular air about him that made me stand back a ways. He folded the money I'd given him, and through the interpreter he said, "The Americans come here at night sometimes."

"How many? And always at night?" I spoke through the interpreter but not to him, preferring to watch the old man.

He held up six fingers to the interpreter and nodded. "Always at night," the interpreter said. "Usually about six of them come

in from the jungle down that path we used."

The old man began to jabber in Vietnamese, a longwinded account of something. I could only wait until he was done.

Finally the interpreter said, "He say they come here at night and stay with the prostitutes Mr. Tiger brings for them in his jeep. Mr. Tiger, he leaves. The soldiers are not here every night, but they stay all night to just before dawn. Then Mr. Tiger come back and pick up girls and take them to Phu Bien."

"Ask him what happened the night someone was shot here. When did it happen? Did he see it? Ask him like that, in those words."

It seemed like forever before the interpreter said, "He say last week it happened, but he did not see. He was in his house when shots were fired in Mr. Tiger's house, where the Americans and the Vietnamese prostitutes were. He say maybe five or six shots he heard. Not all at once. Then the soldiers ran out carrying another soldier, running down the path into the jungle."

"Ask him if he would recognize any of the men if he were to see them today. Were they white soldiers or black soldiers?"

A moment later the interpreter said, "He say he does not recognize them because it is always

dark and he is always in his house. He does not know."

I pointed at my shoulder and my 6th Division patch sewn there. "Ask him, did they wear one of these?" There were hundreds of units in the area, and I was hoping to pin it down as close to the 2/11th as I could. But before his answer could be translated, the old man shook his head no, so I knew he'd seen no unit patches either.

"What else can he tell me about what happened that night?"

Vietnamese was exchanged between the interpreter and the peasant. The old man shrugged. Then the interpreter said, "He does not know any more than what he has said."

"Just that he heard several shots last week in the hut and the GI's came running out carrying a body and the GI's come here always at night but not every night, and Mr. Tiger provides the entertainment?"

"That is correct."

A good interpreter not only translates but also is not afraid to use his own insights into the people he is speaking with, so I asked, "Do you believe him?"

"Yes. He is telling the truth, I think."

"Ask him one more thing. Ask when Tiger told him about me, and what did he say?"

The question was put to the old man.

"He say Mr. Tiger drive his jeep from Phu Bien to the village this morning. This man help Mr. Tiger load boxes from the hut to his jeep. He does not know what was in the boxes, but they were very heavy. Mr. Tiger tell him he must get them out because a very tall American is coming today and will be asking questions about what happened here. Mr. Tiger say he does not want to talk with the American C.I.D. soldier."

"How many boxes? How big?"

A few moments later, "He say maybe ten and so large enough that they almost did not all fit in the jeep."

"Do the VC ever come here?"

"Hey, Hatch," Sommers interjected sternly. "Watch it. You're in my territory."

"Sorry," I said, "just that one last question."

The MI interpreter glanced at Sommers to see if he should ask the question or not. Sommers nodded to go ahead. "Just that one," Sommers told his interpreter.

"He say," the interpreter said after putting the question to the old man, "he does not think the VC come here." The interpreter looked skyward, adjusted his steel pot on his head, added as an aside, "But he is lying about that, Mr. Hatchett."

Before we left the village, I had MI's interpreter address the entire village, asking if any of the villagers had any information regarding the shooting that took place in their midst the week before. All I got in response were blank, hollow looks and stares. As we left, I glanced back at the old woman. She sat squatting outside her hut again, rocking slowly on her haunches, her arms folded around her bony knees, her scraggly black hair hanging down her face, her dead, unblinking eyes following my every step until we were out of sight.

Sommers, Mitch, and I lagged behind the others on the trail back to Victoria.

"I'd say the trip was fruitful for you," Sommers said.

"Oh yeah. If I believe the old man, I'm now sure something did happen, and I know where it happened. I just don't know why or who in particular did the shooting. My problem is, I've got to be able to place Reynolds and his patrol in that village that night. That's all there is to it. I've got to chip away at the wall of secrecy and complicity they've built around themselves. That isn't going to be easy, but I can use what I already know, and I'm hoping I can use Collins as a kind of battering ram."

"Collins?" Mitch asked. "The one on R&R?"

"I have him on ice right now. When I called the C.I.D. yesterday, I told them to pick up Collins the minute he stepped off the chopper back from R&R and to hold him at the MP's in base camp and let him talk to no one. He's in for a real surprise. He doesn't have the slightest idea we even suspect something went on on that patrol. They'll fly him to Victoria when I'm ready for him. Maybe he'll talk."

"What do you think were in the boxes Tiger stuffed in his jeep?" Mitch asked. "If it were anything of value, why would he leave them in that village in the middle of the jungle?"

"My first thought was so the VC could pick them up; then I realized Tiger probably wouldn't risk the villagers' knowing he has VC connections. So more than likely he was storing them there, out of sight. I'm guessing it's military stuff."

"Why's that?" Mitch asked.

"Remember when we heard Captain Boggs complaining that they were missing a lot of items, food, starlight scopes, radios, and God only knows what else? I want to check with him later to see how his inventory came out finally."

"Ah, Jesus, whether Tiger's storing it or passing it out to VC, either way the VC eventually will end up with whatever it is,"

Sommers said. "You're sure it's military materiel?"

"It's a very good chance. If it is happening, Reynolds and the boys are in way over their heads and don't even know it. They probably think Tiger is just another man out to make a buck off the black market. They could be selling him military stuff out here in the village, or maybe in Phu Bien. Things bought cheap at the PX in the MACV compound in Phu Bien, too, probably. The only limit over here is your own imagination when it comes to stealing and selling something."

"You think they're getting free use of the girls as payment?" Mitch asked.

"I hope they're getting more than that. Those girls would be nothing more than openers for a guy like Tiger. He'll keep asking for more and more, sucking the men deeper into his scheme. After a while it gets so bad, you can't refuse."

"That jibes with Willard's saying Berkley told him that they were up to no good again and that it was getting worse."

"Right-o. They may have gone from bringing girls onto Victoria to meeting some out here and then on to selling stuff to Tiger. They could have met Tiger sometime while they were running around in Phu Bien. I think that's where those star-

light scopes are. The VC have them now and are using them on us if Tiger is a high level VC. I don't know what else is going to turn up missing in Boggs's inventory, but no one loses *two* starlight scopes. They probably stole them right under the nose of a very inattentive Lieutenant Macy."

"We don't know for sure it was military equipment Tiger got out of there," Mitch said.

"Well, whatever it was, he was not supposed to have it and took the stuff out of there in a hurry. He didn't want me seeing it. If it were just business or personal items, he'd know I'd have no interest in them, nor any authority to take them." We walked in silence along the path. "I've just had another horrible thought, though." What had suddenly occurred to me stopped me dead on the trail.

Sommers and Mitch stopped, too. "What?" Sommers asked.

"Your informant. You said lately he'd become unreliable. You were basing that on what the patrol of the 2/11th reported. Correct?"

Sommers nodded. "We were more or less comparing reports, yes. We were testing his reliability. If he proved out, we could use him elsewhere, pay him more. I suppose we're not much unlike Tiger in that respect."

"Well, try this on for size.

There's a very good chance the patrol hasn't been going out to monitor movement. They've been at the village every night they were out. They might have sent one man down the path to keep watch for any VC, but that would be it. Of course, if Tiger is as high up as you say and the patrol was dealing in stolen military goods, Tiger would make sure his little operation wasn't interrupted by a VC patrol wandering in. It's the VC he's buying the stuff for."

Mitch said, "So the patrol is in no real danger, even though they don't know it."

"That's right. Tiger would see to that. But these guys have to write a report when they come in. If they aren't where they're supposed to be, how would they know if there was any movement along that trail? They don't. So they make up something for a report. What I'm saying is, your informant might not have been wrong at all. Probably hadn't been turned. It makes sense because if he did turn to the VC, why'd the VC kill him?"

"I wonder why my informant never told me this was going on. He wouldn't necessarily know who the patrol was or what their job was, and they wouldn't know him, but he should have mentioned these guys staying all night in the village."

"Did you ever ask him?" I said.

Sommers grunted no and continued down the path. "I would never have thought to," he said.

"Could be he didn't want to cross Tiger in what he might have seen simply as just another blackmarket operation, the kind run all over Vietnam. Could be *he* was getting money from Tiger, too. He wouldn't know Tiger is VC any more than Reynolds does. We're dealing with a lot of unreliaables here."

"Whatever," Sommers said. "Now I'll have to go through all the patrol's reports and consider them tainted. Two weeks ago they reported that a company-sized unit of VC passed through the area down that trail. What you're saying is, that could be a boldfaced lie."

"What was your informant's report on that?"

"I don't know. By that time I'd stopped talking with him, figuring he'd been turned."

"I want these guys," I said to Mitch. "I've got a plan that will require a little theatrics from you. Maybe it'll shake something loose and one of those buzzards will start talking."

The Wall

As it turned out, wanting them and getting them were miles apart, theatrics or no theatrics, plan or no plan.

Once back on Victoria, my first step was to revisit Captain Boggs to find out what had turned up missing from the 2/11th's inventory. I found him in the mess hall, clipboard in hand. He was counting something on the floor.

"This is a good one," he said. "I have a requisition form here signed months ago by Lieutenant Macy for a hundred sheets of plywood and picked up at supply by Sergeant Reynolds. It's noted on the form that the plywood was to be used to replace rotting plywood on the floor of the mess tent. Not only do I not see any new plywood on this floor, but that many sheets is enough to cover this entire mess tent three times. That's what caught my attention. I've done carpentry work back in the world. A hundred sheets is thirty-two hundred square feet."

I didn't bother telling him I knew where his plywood was. "What else seems to be missing?" I asked.

He glanced down at his clipboard. "Let's see here: two radios, two starlight scopes, untold cases of Lerps, five jeep tires. I think, but I'm not sure yet, two M-79 grenade launchers plus a case each of tear gas, high explosive, and shotgun rounds for the grenade launchers. The rounds would be hard

to trace, but Reynolds said the M-79's were destroyed in a fire-fight and he thought Lieutenant Macy just forgot to report them destroyed as he should have.

"We're supposed to have an extra medium-sized tent around here, too, but I don't see it. Reynolds said he saw Macy doing something with it one day. We've got a new generator. I don't see that the old one was ever returned, yet it's nowhere around here. And here's another, a good one: our potable-water trailer was stolen. According to Reynolds, an infantry unit that was pulling out sneaked in, hooked up to it, and stole it. The theft supposedly was reported to the MP's."

"I'll check it out," I told Boggs. "Mitch would have a copy of the report." I had a feeling the report would be there. That's not to say the water trailer was actually stolen by another unit, though.

"By the looks of this, and I'm sure there'll be more, I'm lucky I've got a chair to sit in." Boggs slapped the clipboard hard against his leg. "What the hell was Macy doing all this time?"

It hadn't escaped me that Sergeant Reynolds' name seemed to pop up an awful lot. If Reynolds was stealing and then black-marketing the stuff, he was going about it well, mixing it up and always having a good rea-

son for things' being missing. When he couldn't come up with one, he blamed Lieutenant Macy, who was now a half a world away.

"Did any of those men I talked to in your tent go into Phu Bien after I brought Thiel back yesterday?" I asked. I was hoping to discover who had tipped off Mr. Tiger and sent him scurrying out to the village.

Captain Boggs thought for a moment. "Thiel did. He drove in an hour or so after you brought him back. He said Sergeant Reynolds told him to pick up the laundry in Phu Bien."

"Did you hear Reynolds tell him that?"

"No. I just gave Thiel permission. I was too busy counting up everything we don't have. I have to do it because apparently Reynolds can't count very well. His inventory and mine aren't anywhere near close. Especially when it comes to ammo."

The next day I had them separated and under guard.

Reynolds was put in the provost marshal's office. Watson was in the MP's commanding officer's tent. Jefferson was being watched in Mitch's hooch. Thiel got the empty POW compound. I was saving MI's command tent for when it was time for Mitch to bring Collins in from the chopper pad. Mitch knew the part he

had to play, and he had what he needed with him.

I went from tent to tent hitting each soldier with everything I had: Willard's conversation with Berkley the morning before he was killed; Berkley's jungle fatigue shirt; the lack of any sign of a firefight where they'd said they had one; the old man in the village telling me of GI's being there; the gunshots in the hut and the body being carried out; the missing items from their compound—I listed them one by one; Mr. Tiger.

Even in the face of all that, they didn't budge. They didn't waver from their version of what had happened. Whenever I tried to get into particulars, like Berkley's shirt, they went vague. "Things were real confusing in the firefight." Or, "I wasn't watching." Or simply, "I don't know."

I concentrated on Thiel, hitting him hardest, but he had grown a little more sure of himself and more fortified. I hoped it was a false security.

"Come on, Thiel," I said to him. "I know what happened. Instead of being out on the trail where you were supposed to be, you guys were going to that village and meeting girls that Mr. Tiger brought out to you. You were doing this regularly. But something happened that night. Was there an argument? Was it

that Berkley didn't like the increasing amount of stuff you were selling to Tiger? Who shot Berkley in that hut?"

Thiel sat there stone-faced.

"I don't know, Mr. Hatchett. I don't know where you got all that. Berkley was killed out on the trail where I showed you."

"Like hell he was, Thiel. He was shot in the hut, and you guys carried his body to that spot and then staged a fake firefight by firing into the air. You had to have some way to explain his death."

"You're not hanging nothing on me, Mr. Hatchett, simply because you think you've got to have someone," Thiel said. "All you have is suspicions and the word of an old man. I've never been in that village in my life that I remember. How much did you pay the old man? Did any of the other villagers verify it?"

I ducked out of the tent without answering that.

All the others were basically the same.

Jefferson: "The old man is probably VC. You ever think about that, Mr. Hatchett? He'd tell you just about anything. I may have been in that village once or twice, I don't know. I've been through a lot of villages."

Watson: "I don't know about the shirt. I didn't see it. Do you know for sure it wasn't unbuttoned? Maybe he was taking a

breather when the VC saw him, and he'd unbuttoned his shirt to cool off."

Reynolds: "You think I stole all that stuff? Hell, the water trailer should be or better be on a report right in this MP office somewhere. It was stolen by another unit. It happens all the time over here, one unit stealing off another. The plywood was used for something else, I think. I can't remember what Lieutenant Macy did with it. I don't know about the shirt. I can't explain the shirt. Maybe it was unbuttoned after all. I don't know any Tiger. There are lots of tigers around. Did you know, Mr. Hatchett, this is the area Teddy Roosevelt used to come to to hunt tigers? It wasn't called Vietnam then. But I don't know a man named Tiger."

"I'll tell you where the plywood is," I countered. "It went to build that hut."

"Prove it," Reynolds said confidently. He knew what I knew: the plywood was untraceable, no numbers on it.

I ignored his brashness. "And I'll tell you about that shirt. Berkley's shirt was off when he was shot in the hut. He took it off, undressing for one of the whores, and then something happened and he was shot. Before you carried him out, you had to put his shirt back on. But you forgot about the shirt need-

ing bullet holes in it to match the wounds. You couldn't know Pfc. Willard would pick the shirt up. That's how it worked."

He stared straight ahead. "I've never been in that village. Never. Never been any nearer to it than where those recon patrols took us." A smart-aleck, cocky grin passed over his face; apparently he sensed my frustration. He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. "I found Berkley lying dead on the trail. Thiel told me you found his blood there. Shell casings, too. Maybe I was wrong about his shirt being buttoned. Maybe it was open. It gets—"

"I know, I know," I said. "It gets pretty confusing during a firefight."

"Right on, Mr. Hatchett."

I figured it was time to bring in Collins.

I had all the men brought to the PMO tent. I threw open the tent flaps so they'd get a good look when Mitch pulled in with Collins in the jeep.

Through the open flaps we watched Mitch lead Collins across the MP area towards MI's area. Mitch held a starlight scope, which actually belonged to the MP's, and he was playing his role well.

Mitch made sure the group in the PMO tent got a good look at the starlight scope. He waved it

at Collins as if he were talking to him about it.

"Good," I said to the group as they sat in the tent with their eyes glued on Mitch and Collins. "You see we have your friend," I told them. "I'll find out what he has to say. And it looks as if Mitch finally caught up with Tiger. Do you guys recognize what he's carrying?"

None of them spoke. Thiel lowered his head and put his hands over his face; I sensed a crack in the wall. Sergeant Reynolds tried to snicker, wanting to give the impression he was unconcerned, but it wasn't very convincing. Watson and Jefferson continued staring wide-eyed past the tent flap but saying nothing.

I turned to leave the PMO. Even if Mitch's theatrics didn't get to them, I still had the possibility Collins would talk, so I was feeling confident, very confident, when I said, "I'm going to leave you guys in here alone. I'm going to give you one more chance to come clean on this. I'm going to give you a chance while I see what Collins has to say. You guys discuss among yourselves what you want to do." I motioned for the MP in the tent to leave and went to see Collins.

Collins was worse than the others; not quite as cocky as Reynolds but just as firm in his story.

I knew why they were corroborating each other's lies.

This was a group of men, like many infantry units, whose lives often depended on the other guy's being dependable, being there for him in the worst situation a man can find himself in, the very hot, frantic, life-and-death experience of a firefight. Who lived, slept, ate, talked about families and futures together; shared laughs and heartaches with each other. They lived and died together. To lie for one another was *nothing*.

Collins' version was an echo of what the others had said: Berkley was killed on the trail by VC. He didn't know about a shirt or even anything about Reynolds' dragging Berkley out of there. He was too busy off to the side firing at the VC. Things get pretty confusing, he said. (Oh, how I hated hearing that again and again, however true it was.) He didn't think he'd ever been to the village; knew no one named Tiger; knew nothing about selling anything to anyone. Had no idea, in fact, why Berkley might think one of them wanted him dead. Berkley was kind of a weird farmboy anyway, Collins stated.

While I escorted him to the PMO tent to join the others, I could feel my confidence ebbing. For a brief moment I began to wonder if maybe Berkley *had*

been killed by the VC in just the way they said. But then, I believed the old man. I'd seen the spot Berkley was supposedly killed in and had my doubts about that. I had Willard's statement, and I had the shirt. But I wasn't anywhere near as sure of myself as I had been when I'd first brought them to the MP area. At this point I sensed that instead of my chipping away at them they were chipping away at me, at my confidence and determination; the sledge hammer was being weakened by the sheer heft of the wall.

What I lacked was any physical evidence, or even a reliable statement, to verify my suspicions. Without either I couldn't place them in that village, let alone connect them to what happened there.

When Collins entered the tent, he winked at Reynolds. Reynolds gave him a slight nod in response.

"Well, Mr. Hatchett," Reynolds said, "if you're about done with us, I'd like to get back to our area. I've got to start packing. I'm due to go back to base camp tomorrow to begin being processed out of this country."

"None of you are going anywhere," I said sharply. Nothing I'd said all day had the effect that telling them that did. Reynolds frowned.

"What do you mean?" Thiel asked.

"I mean you all are going to be confined to quarters until this investigation is over. No one's going anywhere. This isn't the end of it." I bent down and got right in Reynolds' face. "And I'll put a stop on your orders for Fort Dix, sergeant."

"You can do that?" His lower lip twitched spasmodically.

"Not only can I, I already have." I hadn't actually done it, but I *could* do it and I intended to make it my first order of business once I got to base camp.

"How long will the investigation take?" Thiel asked. "I'm due to be discharged from the army within the month, maybe earlier if I get an early out."

"How long?" I said. "As long as it takes. And sometimes I move real slow. If I were you, I wouldn't be planning any big coming home party just yet."

Thiel swore out loud. "Jesus," he said.

The first winning blow I'd scored all day.

"And if your investigation turns up nothing?" Sergeant Reynolds asked. "Then we can go home?"

"Then you can go home. But not until I'm satisfied, and I warn you, I'm not easily satisfied."

The telephone rang, and an MP picked it up. "He's right

here," the MP said and handed me the phone. "One of the MP's guarding the front gate wants to talk with you."

From the other end I heard, "Mr. Hatchett, this is Sp/4 Jones out at the main gate. I have a female Vietnamese civilian who insists on talking with you. She doesn't speak English, so bring an interpreter. Luckily a Special Forces jeep was going through, and one of the Green Berets translated for us. She says she wants to talk about some GI being killed by another GI in a village somewhere. She says she was working in the hut when it happened. She says she works for someone named Tiger."

I could not believe what I was hearing. One of the prostitutes, I thought. That was going to be my next step, to find them and question them. They were the only other ones in the hut when Berkley was killed, and they wouldn't have the allegiance to the patrol that the men had for each other. What a lucky break, I thought. A softhearted whore.

"I'll be right out," I told the MP. "Make her comfortable. Treat her like a lady. Don't try anything with her no matter how goodlooking she is." Many of the Vietnamese women were very goodlooking, and I figured that a man of Tiger's stature would only employ top-of-the-line girls. Last thing I needed

was a sex-starved MP making unwanted advances on what I hoped would be my top-of-the-line witness.

The MP snickered. "You don't have to worry about that, Mr. Hatchett," he said.

I sent an MP to MI to get their interpreter and told the group in the PMO, "Don't go anywhere just yet. It seems one of your girlfriends has something to say."

By the stunned, ashen looks that spread over their faces, I assumed I'd scored another blow. For me, things were beginning to brighten suddenly. But when I got to the main gate, it was my turn to be stunned.

The female Vietnamese waiting for me was not a young, goodlooking prostitute. It was the old woman who'd been crying in the village, the mother of Sommers' dead informant.

A Mother's Story

"Tell her I can't pay her. Tell her it isn't that I don't want to, I just can't."

The interpreter spoke to the woman as we drove slowly back to the PMO. I wanted to give her time to tell me what she knew before we stood face to face with the patrol.

"She say she does not want to be paid."

I stole a sidelong glance at the somber old woman in the passenger seat of the jeep.

For warmth against the cool evening she wore a thin shawl draped over her bony shoulders and a faded, thin, print blouse that looked like it hadn't been washed in weeks. She had on typical black silk pajama bottoms and a cone-shaped straw hat. She held onto the hat to keep it from being blown away by the air of the moving jeep rushing back in her face. Her skin had a dark yellow tint to it and was cracked and wrinkled like old, worn, dirty leather.

The interpreter was in the back, leaning over her shoulder.

"Ask her what she saw in the hut. Why was she in the hut?"

"She say," said the interpreter, "sometimes she work for Mr. Tiger. She pour drinks for the prostitutes and the American soldiers sometimes; sometimes she bring them what they ask for. Every morning she clean the hut when they are all gone."

"What happened the night the soldier was shot?"

"She say they argue loud. She does not understand what they argue about. But she thinks they had too much to drink. And she see them smoke some, ah, some pot. How you say? Marijuana?"

"Okay, go on."

"She say the one GI who got

killed, he come out of the room where he was with the prostitute, and he argue with another GI and push him hard against the wall. Then the GI who was pushed, he point his rifle at him and he shoot him."

"Would she recognize the man who did the shooting?"

"She say each one shoot the American soldier after he was shot the first time. She would recognize them all. She say also she think the shot GI was dead because she go to him and she grab his hand and she can feel the life leave him then. They push her aside, and each soldier shoot the dead American again."

"What were the others doing during all this?"

"She say they looked very scared, and they argue some more. Maybe, she think, they do not like to shoot the dead man some more. But they do. Then they talk and argue some more. Then someone go get the dead GI's shirt, and they put it on him and carry him out of the village."

"So one man shot him and then the others went up and put a bullet in him? Where'd they shoot him, in what part of his body?"

The interpreter said, "Here." He motioned to his upper torso.

I pulled the jeep to a stop. "Was Mr. Tiger there when the man was killed?"

"She say no. She say Mr. Tiger

always there when they arrive at the village, but Mr. Tiger, he always leave. He come back the next day and take the girls to Phu Bien."

"Does she know the girls, their names, where they live?"

"Oh yes. She know the girls."

This Vietnamese woman might make an iffy witness, but if the prostitutes verified her account, that could be testimony weighty enough to place the patrol in the village.

"What did she do after they left?"

The interpreter touched her shoulder, asking the question. "She say she clean up the hut and she go get some dirt and spread the dirt on the large amounts of blood from the GI bleeding on the floor so the flies do not come around."

"Where was the GI lying when he fell bleeding?"

"She say right behind the door."

"And that's where she spread the dirt?"

"Yes, that is correct, Mr. Hatchett. She did not want the flies to drink the blood."

I could have kissed that old lady. She knew where on his body Berkley was shot, and she knew about the dirt spread on the floor. I was beginning to believe her.

"Ask her why she didn't tell me this when we were in the vil-

lage?" There was still the possibility that she knew the old man had made money with his story and saw an opportunity to make some, too. Maybe she'd hit me up later. There was also the possibility she was telling me her story because she was a VC sympathizer bent on getting some GI's into trouble. Being a VC sympathizer would most certainly call her testimony into question. But Sommers didn't seem to think that was the case with her, and he knew her tragic history better than I.

"She say she did not say anything because she did not want to at first. Then she changed her mind this morning after she saw you in the village. She say she came here because she does not want the others in the village to know she talk with the American C.I.D. soldier."

I jammed the jeep in gear and drove on. "Tell her I want her to identify the men who were in the hut that night. The one who first shot the GI and then the others."

She nodded once, agreeing.

Each man's putting a bullet into Berkley certainly explained why the patrol had been lying for each other. They all had a hand in Berkley's death.

"And tell her I'm very sorry about the death of her son."

The interpreter translated as we stepped from the jeep in the

MP area. She responded by glaring at me across the jeep, her hollow black eyes unflinching and angry, almost accusing, like she thought I was insincere in my condolences, or worse, she was blaming me, a U.S. soldier, for her son's death. She rattled off a few terse, angry Vietnamese sentences.

The interpreter said, "She say how can you be sorry about his death? The VC kill him and she does not like the VC, but if there was no Americans, there would be no one for the VC to fight. No war. And her son would be alive." The interpreter shrugged as if it made perfect sense to him, too.

So it really made little difference to her whose side I was on. She didn't like us any more than she liked the VC. We were fighting for some cause, however vague it was sometimes to us, but it was not *her* cause. In her mind all of us had a hand on the machete that hacked her son to pieces out in the jungle. We all had a hand in killing her husband in Phu Bien and maybe even her parents.

As we walked to the tent, I was bothered by why she'd sought me out with her story. Why was she getting involved?

I don't believe I've ever seen so many dumbfounded expressions on so many men as there were

on the faces of the five from the 2/11th when I escorted the old woman into the PMO tent.

Mouths dropped open as if they had weights tied to their chins. They sat in folding chairs staring at her, their faces awash with disbelief. One of them swore under his breath. They all fidgeted nervously in their seats. Someone said, "Oh God."

None of them rose, so I said, "Have you men forgotten military training? Stand up when a lady enters a room."

"A lady?" Sergeant Reynolds laughed harshly. He was the only one who didn't rise. "That old hag? I'm not standing up for *her*."

Behind Reynolds stood a black MP who was as big as a mountain. I told him, "Sergeant Reynolds is having difficulty standing up. Would you help him?"

"Gladly," the MP said.

He grabbed Reynolds' shoulder with a huge paw and a vise-like grip and jerked him to his feet in one swift motion.

"Get your hands off me, nigger," Reynolds shouted angrily.

The black MP released his grip when he had Reynolds on his feet. With a slight smile he shrugged the slur off and stepped back. He'd been called that before, I imagined, busting up barroom brawls. It was part of his MP training—to learn you're going to take insults from

GI's, racial insults included. It was Jefferson who surprised me. The black infantryman shot a hot, angry look at Reynolds, and I sensed that the mere presence of the old woman was having a crumbling effect already. They were already coming apart. Suddenly they all seemed very, very uneasy; once cocky and sure of themselves, they were now angry, feeling pinched. And she hadn't even begun to point fingers yet.

"Ask her," I said to the interpreter, "if she recognizes any of these men."

The old woman gave them a casual glance and replied.

"She say all of them plus the dead GI come many nights to the village. These men were the ones who were in the hut when the GI was killed. She has seen them all there many times."

"Who shot the GI the first time?"

No one as much as twitched for the longest moment.

Finally, "She say that one get pushed and he shoot the one who push him." The interpreter pointed at Sergeant Reynolds.

"That lying gook!" Reynolds shouted. "She's VC. I've always thought she was a VC."

I looked at the big black MP again. "It seems Sergeant Reynolds is having his usual problems keeping his smart mouth shut. If he speaks out of turn

again, cuff him and stuff him with something."

"Will do," the MP smiled.

Back to the interpreter. "And the others?"

He translated her reply. "She say, after Reynolds shoot the GI, this one," he pointed at Watson, "shoot him. Then that one," he indicated Collins, "then that one and that one." He pointed at Jefferson and Thiel in that order. Thiel had his face in his hands. The others, except Reynolds, looked at the ground. Reynolds was glaring at the old woman.

"Any smart remarks now, Sergeant Reynolds?" I asked.

"Oh? I'm allowed to speak now, am I? Well, let me tell you this. Are you going to take the word of that old lady against ours? I'm telling you she's VC. I've always thought that."

"How do you know her, Reynolds? You've already told me you've never been near her village. How could you suspect this woman of being a VC if you've never been there?"

"Shut up, Reynolds," Jefferson said. "He's right. You talk too much. And you definitely say the wrong things sometimes."

"Ask her if these men know Tiger."

The answer: "Of course they know Mr. Tiger. He bring the girls. This one," the interpreter pointed at Reynolds again, "she

say he always have some drinks with Tiger, and they talk outside the hut before Mr. Tiger leave the GI's with the prostitutes. Sometimes he put some small things in Mr. Tiger's jeep that they carry with them when they come in from the jungle. Oh yes. They all know who Mr. Tiger is."

"What did he put in the jeep?"

The old woman shrugged as she answered the interpreter.

"She say she cannot see because she is always busy with the GI's and the prostitutes."

"How much did you pay her?" Sergeant Reynolds asked me.

I nodded to the interpreter to ask the question.

The interpreter said to Reynolds, "She say she does not want money. She was not paid. The American C.I.D. soldier does not give her any money."

"You're still taking the word of a gook peasant over us," Reynolds said, his anger rising. "She must want something. Ask her why's she doing this?"

Now *that* was a question that concerned me. I'd read that a lawyer won't ask a question he doesn't already know the answer to. Right then I couldn't have agreed with that more. What if she replied, "Mr. Tiger tell me to." That would throw her reliability and thus her testimony right out the tent flap. But I thought she was acting on

her own. And I was curious myself about why she'd offered to speak when she didn't even like us, when she blamed us, in part, for the death of her son. I told the interpreter to ask her, because I had to know.

There are things that are universal in this world, and facial expressions are one of them. Her face suddenly took on a contented, peaceful look, as if she had been waiting for the question and wanted very much to answer it.

She took a long, deep breath that led me to believe she was organizing her many thoughts. When she spoke, it was so rapid that the interpreter translated as she talked, as if he were she.

"She say, after he was shot, I held the GI's hand, like I told you, and he grip my hand and then I could feel the life leave him in that hut. I did not think much about it then. Only that he is very young. I have lost a husband and my parents. So what is it to me if this GI dies, too, I think.

"She say, then a few days later my son is killed by the VC. She say, now I have no one; no husband, no parents, no son. I am like a single cloud floating in the big sky."

"I wandered lonely as a cloud," I thought. She had never read Wordsworth, I was sure, but the

best poetic images are also universal.

"She say, I spend my days crying for my son, and I think a lot about the dead GI and I wonder what the GI's mother will say in America when she learns her son is dead."

"Berkley's mother she's talking about?"

"That is correct," the interpreter said. "She say, I think about the GI's mother, and I think how sad she is going to be. Perhaps the GI's mother is farmer like myself, I think. Is her life hard, too? We are from different countries, and we are great distances apart and we do not know each other, but we are both mothers who have no sons now; hers killed by Americans, mine killed by Vietnamese. We have lost them in war. So for this we are near, too, I think. This is what I'm thinking while I mourn my son."

I interjected, "Tell her Berkley's mother is a farmer." I wasn't sure she was, but I wanted her to keep talking.

He told her, and the woman smiled a little smile.

"She say, I do not know about America. I am told it is very big. Very rich with big farms. I have seen pictures of these. I am a poor woman who has three cattle and some chickens. That is all I have now. But I am like the GI's mother because we are both

mothers who have lost our sons. So I cry for my son and I cry for her son and I cry for the GI's mother, too."

Out of the corner of my eye I watched Thiel shake his head hard and then stand up and stare out the tent flap, listening to the old woman.

"I come to you and tell you all this about what I see in the hut and what I think," the interpreter said, "because I want someone to tell the GI's mother her son did not die alone. The GI's mother will want to know this. Tell her I held her son's hand when she could not. I was glad to do this for her because we are both mothers. He did not die alone."

Thiel was shaking his head harder and harder, and when he turned to face us, his eyes were moist.

"All that is pure hogwash, chickens and cows," Reynolds said. "It proves nothing. It's nothing but talk from a VC."

But the woman kept on talking.

The interpreter said, "She say, you should give this to the GI's mother. She will want to have it. She say, after these men ran out of the hut carrying the body, I found it on the floor of the hut near where the GI died and they put on his shirt."

The old woman reached into a

tiny pocket in her shawl and held her open palm towards me.

The story she'd just related was an expression of universal motherhood, one mother feeling the need and loss of another, a wide ocean away. What she held in her small palm, however, was just then more vital to me than motherhood. It was the final link, the concrete piece of evidence I had sought that put the patrol in the village. Coupled with her testimony and the prostitutes' testimony when I located them, I now had the patrol cold.

It lay in her hand like a jewel glittering in the tropical sun that poured through the open tent flap: a new Zippo lighter engraved *Robert Berkley 2/11th Infantry 6th Infantry Division*.

"And she found this in that hut that night?"

"That is correct, Mr. Hatchett," the interpreter said.

I held up the lighter so they all could see it and announced, "I have an American GI who will swear at your courts-martial that Berkley was in possession of this lighter only a few hours before he went out on patrol with you guys. How could his lighter end up in that village that night unless you all were there and not out on the Ho Chi Minh Trail where you said you were?"

For the first time since I began interviewing this group

they were speechless. All Reynolds could manage was a cold stare. Collins wiped his hands down over his face and pulled at his lower lip. Watson and Jefferson slouched in their chairs and scowled at their feet. Thiel shook his head faster and faster, looking at the lighter. "Ahhhh, man," he said.

And the wall came tumbling down.

The Letter

In the following days, Thiel was the most cooperative. The shooting had happened pretty much the way I'd figured.

Berkley, Thiel said, was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with what Reynolds was selling to Tiger. Berkley didn't mind the plywood, which they loaded into a truck and hauled into Phu Bien to give to Tiger there. He didn't mind the non-armament items like cases of food. But when they began taking starlight scopes and M-79's and ammo on patrol with them to sell to Tiger in the village, that got to be too much.

And Tiger kept asking for more and bigger items and paying more, and when Reynolds said he thought he could get his hands on a few LAAW's—Light Anti-Armor Weapons, a kind of one-shot, throwaway bazooka used against tanks—Berkley is-

sued his final complaint, which started the argument that got him killed.

Reynolds feared that Berkley would go to their new CO, Captain Boggs, and report everything that had been going on. It was Reynolds' idea that everyone should put a bullet in him so they would all have had a hand in it. Thiel said he had trouble with that, so he shot Berkley in the shoulder. He thought Berkley was already dead by then.

"We would contact Tiger in Phu Bien the moment we knew we'd be going on patrol," Thiel explained. "Tiger would bring the girls out that night."

There was only one big surprise for us, from Thiel.

Sommers was with me; he had a stack of the bogus intelligence reports the patrol had filed. "Here's one here—a whole company of VC passed along that trail, you reported," Sommers said sharply. He was not a happy camper. "I have to assume that that never happened, that none of these reports are accurate."

"Oh, the one on the company of VC is true," Thiel told him.

"You saw a company of VC pass through the village? An entire company? While you were in bed with whores? Come on, Thiel."

Thiel shook his head.

"We didn't see them. What

happened was, a kid came to us when we first got into the village that night. I don't know who he was, just a kid who lived there. He was all excited about something, and he didn't speak English very well, but he was babbling about some VC. Sergeant Reynolds took him outside and talked to him, and when Reynolds came back into the hut, he was grinning, saying, 'Well, the kid gave us something we can put on our report for tonight. He told me he'd seen a company of VC going through a couple of nights ago. I paid him a few bucks for the info.'"

Sommers was simmering, his words precise and hot:

"That kid did not speak English. Who translated for Reynolds?"

Thiel thought a moment. "Tiger did."

Sommers spun around and left the tent shouting, "Tiger? You idiots. You got that kid, my informant, killed. Tiger is VC."

I realized then that the woman was right—that in fact there was an American hand on the machete the VC used to hack her son to death.

My two-page letter to Mrs. Berkley was almost complete. I had promised the old woman that I'd write to her,

detailing everything the old woman had told us. It was the only thing she'd asked for. I offered to have it translated so she could read it, but she only wanted to get back to her village, back to her life.

I'd also promised the old woman that I'd send Mrs. Berkley the lighter when the trials were all over and the members of the patrol began serving hard time in Leavenworth. For the time being we needed it for evidence.

I was searching for some way to end the letter.

On my desk was a recent issue of *Stars and Stripes*; the newspaper's lead story was a report on the peace negotiations just beginning in Paris. I added to the letter, closing it out:

In reading about Henry Kissinger and his entourage of diplomats and statesmen and politicians and generals currently beginning to negotiate a peace with a similar group of men from North Vietnam, and how they say it'll probably take a year to reach an honorable agreement that satisfies both sides, I'm given to wonder about some things.

Can any peace be dishonorable? How many more will die while the negotiations plod along? In reviewing the entire incident involving the death of your son, I also wonder what would happen if the widows of soldiers and the mothers of men who have died on both sides sat down and talked peace. I feel they would cut right through the ideological barriers that so often bog peace processes down. Somehow, I think, they'd find an end to all this with haste and without argument.

My deepest sympathies,

Carl Hatchett

Warrant Officer

Criminal Investigation Division

United States Army

I sealed the letter and stood gazing out my office window, out across the olive drab—very drab—military compound that was headquarters for the Sixth Division's war machine, out towards Pleiku and the parts of that impoverished city I could see, up and across the high blue tropical sky.

Two small clouds were drifting, wandering, floating.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

I was sitting in my new office just off the gym at Illiana U., rather proud to be chosen as the new head basketball coach. Then my predecessor, the great Johnny Dawes, entered, and I felt very humble.

"Just came to clear out my desk and locker," he said. Nevertheless, he sat down.

"Everybody's sorry to see you retire," I remarked. "What a career! Head coach for forty-two years, winning the conference twenty-nine times—even two national championships. I guess the only thing left for you is the Hall of Fame."

"If it's offered, I'll refuse it," he said seriously.

"Surely you can't mean that." I was astounded.

"I do mean it. You think I'm a great coach? Hell, I once ruined a boy's career."

"You're kidding?"

"Unfortunately, no. It happened years ago. We'd had a perfect season. So had our opponent, Kentesssee. Gamblers were giving odds of three to two in our favor. Then a flu epidemic reduced my players to the starting five and two substitutes. Still, I had hopes. I gave the seven my best pep talk. 'You can still do it!' I told them.

"Well, my team scored 83 points, with 29 rebounds and 18 turnovers. It was a rough game. But at the horn, Kentesssee had 84 points. We lost. Losing wasn't the bad part, though. I got a letter—unsigned—offering me five thousand dollars as my share for throwing the game, with complicated instructions on how to collect and saying that my starting guard who'd scored fewer points than the other guard had already been paid off."

"What did you do?"

"I notified the athletic director, the university president, and the NCAA immediately. The decision was to suspend the player until an investigation was completed. Saddest thing I ever had to do. I called him in to my office.

"'An accusation has been made that you threw that game,' I be-

gan. 'I have no choice but to suspend you for the time being. It's for the good of the team and the university.'

"He seemed in shock. 'Coach,' he said, 'I've *always* played my best. But if it helps the team, I quit—for good.' He walked out, and there went his future in basketball. Oh, I followed his career later. He graduated and made a living as a contractor, but that shadow hung over him—always."

"But if he was guilty—"

"He was innocent, dammit. It was another player who sold us out. Let me tell you about the game. The players' last names were Hall, Iverson, Jones, Kempe, Lagler, Moore, and North. I'd recruited them from different high schools—Ardmore, Burwell, Carson, Darton, Elgin, Farragut, and Gonzola—located in different towns—Olmstead, Petersburg, Quincy, Rawville, Sugsbury, Taylortown, and Ulster . . ."

(1) Hall, the player from Quincy, and the one from Farragut High included Al, Bert, and Chuck. They were a forward, a guard, and a sub. Together they scored 40 points, with 13 rebounds and 10 turnovers. Al (who was not from Ulster) did not attend Darton High. Bert (who was not from Sugsbury) had twice as many rebounds as he had turnovers. One player had no rebounds.

(2) George, the player from Petersburg, and the one from Burwell High included Iverson, Jones, and Moore. They played center, forward, and guard, and together they scored 37 points, with 15 rebounds and 6 turnovers. Of the three, Iverson scored the fewest points, and Moore had the fewest rebounds. The player who attended Burwell High and Earl together scored 16 points, with 8 rebounds and 5 turnovers.

(3) Don, Lagler, and the player from Darton High included those from Rawville, Sugsbury, and Taylortown. They played forward, guard, and substitute. Together they scored 38 points, with 16 rebounds and 9 turnovers. Of the three, the one from Rawville had the fewest rebounds, and the one from Taylortown (who wasn't Chuck) scored the most points. Frank, Lagler, and the player from Farragut High did not include those players who had 2, 5, and 7 rebounds. Don and Kempe had a combined total of 12 rebounds.

(4) Frank, Kempe, and the player from Olmstead attended Ard-

more, Carson, and Gonzola high schools. They played center, forward, and guard, and together they scored 43 points, with 13 rebounds and 4 turnovers. Of the three, the player from Ardmore High had the fewest rebounds, and the one from Gonzola High scored the most points. Frank was the only player who did not have a turnover; he was not the player from Ulster (who did not play forward). Earl wasn't the player from Olmstead.

(5) George, North (who did not play guard), and the player from Darton High weren't the ones who scored 10, 12, and 16 points. George had five times as many points as turnovers, but he still had more turnovers than did Al.

(6) The two forwards had a combined 4 turnovers. The two guards scored a combined 37 points. The two substitutes scored only a total of 8 points.

"Well," I said, "if the guard scoring fewer points wasn't guilty, who was?"

"The player who had the most turnovers. He intentionally let the other team take the ball from him. Years after the game, he was seriously wounded in an auto accident. Facing the prospect of dying, he confessed that he threw the game for ten thousand dollars."

"But, Johnny," I said, "it wasn't your fault."

"The hell it wasn't!" he retorted. "A good coach *knows* his players. I should have known who was the truly honest one and who was the likely scoundrel."

With that the great Johnny Dawes said goodbye and walked out into the night.

Which player was falsely accused? Who was the traitor who betrayed his team for money?

See page 140 for the solution to the February puzzle.

FICTION

All the Kings Forces



William L.
Sampson

Lieutenant Arnie Belcher leaned back precariously in his broken swivel chair. "So what's the word on this Woodrow Willison?"

Joe Slattery, Central Precinct's Oldest Living Detective, leaned back somewhat more securely against the door frame. "He didn't report to his parole officer yesterday morning, didn't show up for work yesterday afternoon, and the people at his apartment house aren't sure he was home over the weekend."

"So he looks good for that Sunday night holdup over in Greene County."

"I don't know, Arnie . . ."

"The M.O. fits him like a glove. In fact, I doubt if there's anybody anywhere in the world with an M.O. like his."

"Yeah, but why would the guy do a job that has his signature all over it? He served his time, he's beginning a new career—it just doesn't add up."

"You'd better go over there and nose around."

Slattery grinned.

"Just for a day or two," Belcher added hastily.

"How about three days? I could try out my new spinning rod."


"Forget the spinning rod, I need you back here on those stolen securities."

Slattery did as he was told. In-

stead of the new spinning rod, he packed his old bamboo fly rod, his hip boots, and a fishing vest loaded with everything from trout flies to line dressing—even some six-packs of toasty peanut butter crackers. Just for good measure he tossed in his landing net, wondering idly if he was going to have to land Woodrow Willison again.

As he drove north on State Route 58 toward the mountains, he wished he had his partner Tom England along for company. But England was on his way to the state penitentiary to interview an inmate who had volunteered to testify in a forgery case, so Slattery passed the time thinking about the events that had led to his arrest of Willison six years before.

It had been a crazy case from the start. Eight stores robbed in the wee hours of one night, by one man. Even the name of the stores had sounded crazy back then: Dumpty's, a chain of convenience markets pretty much like all other such stores right down to the gas pump islands and the gimmicky sixteen ounce soft drink cups. But the corporate sign was another matter: a huge, laughable (maybe even lovable), egg-shaped cartoon character who sat smilingly atop the building, his long legs dangling over the front edge of the roof.



The ten-year-old Dumpty's chain had opened its first store on a Labor Day weekend. Not only did Dumpty's have a great fall that year, but an even better winter, spring, and summer. Now there were twelve Dumpty's in the city and several times that many scattered across the state—each with its own giant egg man perched on the roof.

In his eight-store string of heists Willison, wearing a stocking mask and brandishing a realistic replica of the military Colt .45, had forced each Dumpty's clerk to open both register and safe. The result was a pretty hefty haul—especially for a beginner. But then Willison had done a strange thing. Before leaving the scene, he handed each bewildered clerk “a little something for your trouble”—a fifty dollar bill folded into a miniature bow tie, with the level, no-nonsense gaze of Ulysses S. Grant emanating from the “knot” in the center of the bow.

The news media had jumped on that, dubbing Willison the Bow Tie Bandit. But the sensationalism was short-lived. For Willison it had been strictly a one night stand, possibly because he'd struck a parked car as he fled the scene of the eighth robbery.

Slaterry had caught the case and—with the help of the lab and some watchful patrol offi-

cers—the Bow Tie Bandit as well. Most of the stolen money had been recovered, and Willison, who could have gotten forty years, had done five of the fifteen an insightful judge had bestowed on him. Wisely, he used the time to get his high school equivalency diploma and to work in the kitchen, where he learned cooking from a topflight Belgian chef who was serving a life sentence.

Inevitably the chef was transferred (rumor had it that his cookery was in such demand he was being rotated through several prison systems on a regular basis). At any rate, Willison began to improvise on what he'd learned, preparing dishes that delighted not only his fellow inmates but the warden and various VIP's, including some with more than a little political persuasiveness. In view of all that it was a wonder he was paroled, but the minute he was, Willison walked into a high-paying job at one of the city's better restaurants.

Slaterry's destination that sunny June afternoon was the Greene County seat, a little town called Kings situated just off the scenic forty mile Mountain Parkway. By the time he reached the sheriff's office there he was convinced that Woodrow Willison was either entirely in-

nocent or completely out of his mind.

After identifying himself, Slattery was directed to a large office to see a deputy named Fickell who was investigating Sunday's holdup. There were six desks in the room, but only one was occupied. Seated there, wearing a uniform that looked as though she'd been poured into it, was one of the cuddliest blondes Slattery had seen since his college days.

"I'm Joe Slattery," he said, and showed his gold shield. "Here to talk about the Dump-ty's case. I take it you're Deputy Fickell."

"You can call me Gretchen," she said. "Of course I'm not really."

"Not Gretchen?"

"Not fickle. I mean, my name is, but I'm not. It's just that I don't think I'm quite ready to settle down into a permanent relationship or anything like that."

"I know what you mean," Slattery said, not entirely sure what she'd said, much less what she meant.

"Please have a seat." She indicated a director's chair made of white wood and lavender canvas, which Slattery found surprisingly comfortable. "Are you married, Slattery?" Even her voice sounded cuddly.

"For about a month now. Sec-

ond time around," he added, not wanting to sound like a rank amateur.

"Just my luck," she purred with a smile that said she was only jesting. "So you drove all the way up here to Kings because of your Bow Tie Bandit?"

"You know about the case, then?"

"A Lieutenant Belcher called to tell us you were coming. He briefed me."

"Good old Arnie. At least he saved me some explaining."

"Yes, but I'd still like to know how you caught the guy."

So Slattery told her about the glass fragments from Willison's headlamp and the paint chips from his fender. "The lab boys were able to narrow down the make and model of the car, so we combed the area and found a garage that had just done a job like that. They still had the headlamp; the pieces fit and the paint chips matched, so . . ." He shrugged. "That's how I had the dubious pleasure of meeting Woodrow Willison."

"You're being too modest," she said. "What area of the city did you comb?"

Slattery smiled. Maybe Fickell was forward; she was also showing signs of being a pretty sharp cop. "I just asked myself," he said, "if maybe the bow tie guy had planned things so he'd be pretty close to home after

holding up all those stores. It was a lucky guess—turned out he lived less than a mile from where he struck the parked car.”

“Any reason he picked Dump-ty’s?”

“He said his girlfriend had been employed by them and they hadn’t treated her right, but he wouldn’t elaborate.”

“And why the bow tie bit? That’s really strange.”

“He never would tell us. Striking a blow for all Dumpty’s employees maybe. Look, if you have it handy, I’d like to see the one left at the local store.”

“The store manager kept it. I told him we’d need it for evidence.” Slattery raised an eyebrow, and she quickly added, “Don’t worry, he’s an honest man. We went to school together.” She stood up then, looking cuddly all over. “If you’d like to go talk with him, we can take my cruiser.”

“Lead on,” Slattery said.

The Dumpty’s was located on the western edge of town where the parkway swung through a lush mountain meadow. The store itself, no doubt in deference to its surroundings, had a log cabin look about it, a distinct departure from other stores in the chain. Still, as Slattery pointed out to Fickell when they pulled into the parking lot, the rotund roof sitter who beamed

his banal smile down at them could never compete with the grandeur of Greene Mountain, which loomed just a few miles away.

The store manager, whose name was Donaldson, was only too eager to repeat his story about the Sunday night holdup. “It was real strange,” he said. “This guy comes in about eleven thirty with a stocking over his head, points a gun at me, and says, ‘Give me all your cash.’ So I gave it to him.”

“How much was that?” Slattery asked.

“A little over three hundred dollars.”

“Then what did he do?”

“Told me to open the safe. We’re not supposed to do that. In fact the sign on the door says we *can’t* do it, but of course we can.”

“So you opened the safe?”

“Damn right. He said he’d shoot me if I didn’t.”

“How much was in there?”

“Twelve hundred bucks. We’d had a good weekend.”

“And he left after that?”

“Not till he gave me that fifty dollar bow tie.”

Slattery mentally crossed his fingers. “You still have that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, right here.” Donaldson took a small envelope from a drawer and handed it across the counter. “Pretty neat, huh?”

Slattery examined the bow tie.

“Neat enough. I’ll just hang onto this,” he said, placing it in a small plastic bag.

“Is that the genuine article?” Fickell asked.

“Far as I can tell, yes.” Slattery turned to Donaldson. “What did the guy say when he gave it to you?”

“Just ‘Here, take this.’”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah.”

“I know you didn’t see his face, but how would you describe him otherwise?”

“Average height and build, tan khaki pants, dark blue polo shirt, blue baseball cap—and the stocking over his face. I gave all that to Gretchen yesterday.”

“Anything printed on the cap?”

“No, just a plain dark blue cap.”

“Had any more thoughts about his car?” Fickell asked.

“No. Like I told you, he had it parked around at the side. I didn’t see it at all. Or hear it. Of course, I was pretty nervous.” Slattery handed him a mug shot of Willison. “Hey!” Donaldson said. “This guy was in here yesterday and again this morning.”

“A customer?”

“Yeah. Bought some hot dogs and buns, a jar of mustard, a sixpack of canned drinks, and some candy bars. That was yesterday. This morning he bought instant coffee, a dozen eggs, a

gallon of stove and lantern fuel.”

“Sounds like he may be staying at the campground,” Fickell suggested.

“You think this is the guy who robbed me?” Donaldson asked.

Slattery headed for the door. “When we find him, we’ll ask him,” he said. As they climbed into the cruiser, he asked Fickell to drop him off at her office.

“Trying to get rid of me, Slattery?”


He grinned. “I want to be looked upon as a happy camper, not as a cop.”

“Just give me five minutes to get out of this uniform, and I’ll be ready to roll.”

“Okay,” he said, not wanting to pursue that line of thought too far.

They took the Bronco, stopping first for a quick supper at Rusty’s Place, a small, cafeteria-style restaurant that featured “Real Home Cooking.”

Rusty was an aging, redhaired woman who seemed to be everywhere at once: greeting the customers, supervising the serving line, insisting that everyone have dessert, which on this particular day was blueberry pie—and which was one reason long shadows were encroaching on the landscape when Slattery and Fickell finally arrived at the campground store.



The proprietor was a short, friendly man named Jonas Letterman. He had short, sandy hair, blue eyes, a scattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks, and a 35-millimeter camera slung from one shoulder. That he was an inveterate photographer was attested to by both the camera and the photo-festooned bulletin board hanging just inside the front door. The moment Fickell introduced Slaterry as a detective from the city, Letterman said, "Hey, I'll have to get a picture of you!"

"Later," Slaterry said. "First, here's one for you to look at." He handed the mug shot to Letterman. "Seen this man around?"

"Absolutely," Letterman said. "Terrible photograph—too contrasty—but yes, I've seen him." The man had come in the day before, he said, and asked a lot of questions about the campground, saying he had business in the area and would probably rent a tent site later in the week. No, Letterman had not seen him today, nor did he know what kind of car he was driving.

Slaterry asked for the campsite rental list and studied it carefully. "Where will we find the tent sites?" he asked.

Letterman handed him a brochure with a small map printed on the back and pointed a finger. "Right along the creek

here, just beyond the restaurant and gift shop."

Slaterry thanked him, and they left. "I assume you have a current ten-twenty-eight on Willison," Fickell said.

"He's the registered owner of a light blue 1992 Ford Escort," Slaterry said. "Plate number RAB-263."

They drove twice through the campground, but the only light blue vehicle they saw was a Toyota from out of state. "Feel up to a stakeout?" he asked.

She smiled. "Sure, why not?"

He swung into the restaurant parking lot. "From here we can watch both the traffic on the parkway and the road into the camping area."

They sat in silence for a while, then Fickell said, "I get the impression you're not too keen on Willison as the perp."

Slaterry told her about the man's record as a model prisoner and his job at the restaurant. "The guy could have a pretty nice career," he concluded.

"You're right," she said. "He'd be crazy to throw it away."

They talked some more about the case, about their personal interests, the mess the country was in, and how peaceful and quiet it was there in the mountains on that splendid night in June. The first fireflies of the season began emerging from the tall grass at the edge of the

woods, flashing their cryptic mating signals in the silence—and the next thing Slattery knew, Fickell had fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder.

Sometime after eleven o'clock, Slattery himself began alternately dozing off and waking with a start, each time thinking he'd better rouse Fickell but reluctant to disturb her. Just before three A.M., he did try to awaken her. "Gretchen?"

"M-m-m-m-m?"

"It's getting pretty late."

"Did he show?"

"Not yet."

"Night," she said and cuddled even closer.

The sun was just topping the trees at the eastern edge of town when Slattery dropped her off at her garage apartment. His first impulse was to check into a motel for some sound slumber, but then he remembered the trout stream into which emptied the little campground creek. Twenty minutes later, he was standing at the tail of a long, foam-flecked pool below a small waterfall.

He tried several spent-wing fly patterns before settling on a March Brown. Happy as a lark, he caught and released two sparkling twelve inch rainbows and was moving upstream when he saw the bear.

He'd always heard that black bears have poor eyesight, but this one seemed to be watching

him from across the stream with a great deal of interest.


"Good morning, Blackie," Slattery said, and immediately began looking around for the nearest climbable tree. But the bear, after sniffing the air inquisitively, settled back on its haunches and licked its lips in the manner of a dog begging for table scraps. "Go catch your own fish," Slattery said. "You're probably a lot better at it than I am." Then, remembering the peanut butter crackers, he plucked a package from his vest, opened it, and tossed one across the stream.

The bear gobbled up the goody with relish and looked expectantly at his new friend. Slattery popped one of the crackers into his own mouth, and tossed the remaining four, one by one, across and downstream. As the bear ambled after them, Slattery jogged upstream as hurriedly as his hip boots would allow.

He'd gone perhaps a hundred yards when he came to a deep green pool he couldn't resist fishing.

Up ahead through the trees he could see the Bronco and another vehicle parked behind it. He'd made several long casts to the head of the pool when he heard a slight sound behind him.

Thinking the bear might have caught up with him, he turned



quickly and saw a young brunette who was at least as cuddly as Gretchen Fickell and maybe more so. From the look of her forest green uniform, she might also be a game warden.

"Good morning," Slattery said. "You probably want to see my license."

She laughed prettily. "I'm a parkway ranger, so I could do that but I won't. Anyone who casts a dry fly the way you do has to be legal."

"I don't know about the casting, but I am legal. I'm also Joe Slattery."

"And I'm Sharon Sugarfield, but you can call me Sugar."

"No, I can't," Slattery said.

"Why not? Everyone else does."

"I'm in enough trouble already. If my wife finds out I spent the night with a blonde sheriff's deputy, she might . . ."

"Gretchen? You spent the night with Gretchen?"

Slattery hurriedly showed his gold shield. "I'm a cop, too," he said. "We were on a stakeout, looking for the individual who held up the Dumpty's in Kings Sunday night."

"Oh. It was purely platonic, then."

"Absolutely. But we both fell asleep. It was daylight when I took her home."

Sugarfield was shaking all over with silent laughter, which

on her, Slattery decided, looked great. "Gretchen and I are good buddies," she said. She frowned slightly. "You don't think your holdup man is here in the campground, do you?"

"I don't know." Slattery fished out the Willison mug shot and handed it to her. "Either way, this man may be involved."

"Woody!" she said. "This is Woody."

Slattery let out a long sigh. "Tell me about him."

"He's a camper. Just came in, but he's been helping me with our campfire program. Last night he lectured on cooking over charcoal. It seems the man is some sort of *chef de cuisine*."

"So I'm told," Slattery said. "Know where he is now?"

"He waved to me from his car at one of the tent sites half an hour ago."

"What kind of car?"

"It's a white Subaru. Nineteen eighty-nine, I think."

"Can you show me?"

"Of course. It's right by the creek on this end of the campground."

On the way back to their respective vehicles they chatted about the nice weather, the fishing, and the beauty of the mountains, all of which prompted Slattery to mention his wife's interest in nature.

"Vicki. That's a pretty name. You'll have to bring her up here."

We have a lot of wildlife. In fact, a big black bear has been hanging around the campground the past couple of weeks."

"I know," Slattery said. "We met downstream."

"Really? Nice looking bear, isn't he? Some of the campers feed him, though, and they really shouldn't. But I don't have to tell that to a seasoned outdoorsman like yourself." There was a twinkle in her lovely eyes, and Slattery wondered how long she'd been watching him.

"I'll meet you at the tent area," he said.

Aside from having put on twenty pounds or so, Woodrow Willison looked pretty much the way Slattery remembered him.

"I hope you aren't planning to arrest me," Willison said as Slattery frisked him for a weapon, "because I had nothing to do with that Dumpty's job. In fact, I have an alibi for Sunday night."

"Then what are you doing up here?" Slattery asked.

"Looking for the fool who's trying to land me back in the joint."

"How'd you hear about the robbery so fast?"

"It was on all the Monday morning newscasts."

Slattery pointed to the white Subaru, which had picked up quite a bit of dust. "That's not a stolen car, is it?"

"It's my girlfriend's car. She's driving mine."

"Did you pay for this tent site?"

"No, I've been sleeping in the car. I brought along most of my camping stuff, but—" Willison grimaced "—I forgot the tent."

Slattery handed him the bow tie. "Okay, I suppose you'll deny this is your handiwork."

Willison examined the folded fifty and snorted. "You think I'd turn out anything this sloppy? Look at these little torn places along the edges. This is the work of a crass beginner."

"Any idea who that might be?"

Willison looked away.

"I'd rather not say."

"Somebody you showed this trick to? Somebody in the joint, maybe?"

"Look, I don't want you hassling the guy if he's innocent."

"Give me a name," Slattery told him. "Otherwise I'll have to figure you did it."

Willison looked skyward and sighed resignedly. "There's only one guy I ever showed that trick to, and—hey, there he is!"

Both Slattery and Sugarfield jumped, then followed Willison's gaze just in time to see a large black crow glide in for a landing in the upper branches of a lofty yellow pine.

"There who is?" Slattery demanded.

"That's the crow that stole Sugar's bracelet," Willison declared excitedly. "See, he's got something shiny in his beak now."

"Look," Sugarfield said, "he's poking it into that big hole in the tree trunk."

"I'm going up there," Willison said. "Your bracelet's probably in there."

"The only bracelets you'll get are handcuffs if you don't settle down," Slattery warned. "Now, tell me about this guy who does your bow tie bit."

Willison shoved his hands into his pockets.

"He's an old cellmate of mine, a guy named Gord."

"Gord?"

"Short for Gordon, John Gordon."

"Is he on the outside now?"

"I guess he is. When I left, he had less than a year to do."

"What does he look like?"

"You can't miss Gord. He's about forty-five, keeps his hair cut so short he looks bald. And his ears stick out."

"Seen anything of him around here?" Slattery asked, but just then Gretchen Fickell arrived in a shower of gravel. She climbed out of the brown and white cruiser and hurried over to the group.

"Slattery," she said, "there's been another robbery."

"Where?"

"The Dumpty's in Bennington Gap."

"When?"

"About an hour ago. We just got word."

"Same M.O.?"

"To the letter. I have to go down there as soon as my partner gets here." She smiled. "My regular partner, that is."

"I told you I was innocent," Willison said, and before anyone could object, he began shinying up the trunk of the pine tree.

Fickell hooked a thumb in the direction of the tree. "Willison?"

"That's him," Slattery said.

"And I think you just exonerated him. There's no way he could have been in Bennington Gap an hour ago."

"What's he doing?"

Sugarfield explained. "Crows like bright objects, and this one lifted my sterling silver bracelet off a picnic table last week. Woody thinks it may be in that tree."

A succession of short, stubby limbs aided Willison's upward progress; he quickly reached the crow's cache. "Here it is!" he cried triumphantly and held the bracelet up for all to see, nearly losing his balance in the process. "There's a watch here, too, and a lot of other stuff, mostly pull-tabs from aluminum cans. I'll bring just the watch and the bracelet." He started down the

tree but had descended only a few feet when he stopped and said, "Oh my gosh."

"What is it?" Sugarfield called.

"I can't move," Willison said in a very subdued voice. "I don't think I can come down. And I know I can't go back up." He shut his eyes tightly. "I think maybe I'm going to fall."

"Vertigo," Sugarfield said.

"Acrophobia," Slattery suggested.

"Fire and Rescue," Fickell said and hurried to the cruiser.

"Just hang on, Willison," Slattery called. "We'll get you a ladder." It was then that he noticed a maroon van approaching slowly from the highway. As it came abreast of the police cruiser, the driver peered out, and Slattery saw two large ears flanking a nearly bald head—and a pair of eyes that opened wide as Fickell climbed back out of the cruiser, looking cuddly but also looking very official. Then the man and the van were gone, swinging into the road leading to the camp store.

"Hey, Willison!" Slattery said.

"Yeah?" The wayward chef's voice was as shaky as a *gelée de viande*.

"This guy Gordon—do his eyes pop out when he gets excited?"

"Yeah, they do," Willison managed through clenched teeth. "I forgot about that."

Slattery walked over to the cruiser, said something to Fickell, then ambled up the road trying his best to look like a vacationing businessman. The van was parked at the gas pumps, but there was no sign of the driver, so Slattery sauntered into the store. Feigning interest in Letterman's photo display, he watched as the man with the skinhead haircut handed Letterman a fifty dollar bill and asked him to punch up ten dollars' worth of gas.

Convinced now that this was in fact Gordon, Slattery approached the counter and said casually, "Anyone ever shown you how to make a bow tie out of one of those?"

Gordon gave him a bug-eyed look, then lowered his lids and scowled. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said and headed for the door without waiting for his change.

"Wait a minute," Slattery said. "I want to talk to you." But Gordon wanted none of that. He was out the door in a flash and had nearly made it to his van when Fickell pulled the cruiser across the driveway entrance and Slattery shouted, "Police, Gordon! Hold it right there!"

That did it. Gordon was off and running, with Slattery close behind and Fickell bringing up the rear.

Down the driveway, across the

road, and into the woods they went. As they crossed the log bridge over the creek, Slattery heard a sound he couldn't quite place. Then, through the trees, he caught a glimpse of a fire-truck standing in the road with its engine idling. Gordon, apparently unsure of his whereabouts, nearly ran into an eight by ten wall tent, changed course, and headed straight toward two volunteer firemen steadying a ladder against the pine tree. Sugarfield was standing to one side looking up into the branches where Willison presumably was attempting to descend.

Much to Slattery's dismay, Gordon chose that moment to bring out a large semi-automatic pistol—which might or might not have been a real Colt .45.

As he started between the ladder and the tree, he suddenly changed course—perhaps out of superstition but more likely because of the grim look one of the firemen gave him. At any rate he veered left, and Slattery, his own weapon out, gained a few yards.

The meandering creek was straight ahead, and it seemed Gordon would have to turn one way or the other to avoid it. Instead, he stopped dead in his tracks. There among the alders on the near bank of the stream was the same black bear Slattery had encountered earlier.

Gordon turned and looked anxiously back at his pursuers, the gun in his hand now held almost negligently.

Slattery stopped also, a wolfish grin gathering on his face. "Get him, Blackie!" he shouted, and a look of sheer terror swept across Gordon's already wide-eyed countenance.

The bear, apparently recognizing the voice of his peanut butter buddy, reared up on his hind legs, sniffed the air expectantly, and started forward.

"No!" Gordon screamed.

"Good boy!" Slattery said. "Take him down!"

"I give up!" Gordon shouted. "Call him off!" He tossed aside the pistol (which later proved to be real), raised his hands in the air, and hurried toward Slattery.

"On the ground," Slattery said. "Spread-eagle."

Gordon quickly complied. "Cheez!" he said, "I didn't know you guys used bears. I mean, dogs are bad enough, but *bears*? Cheez!"

"Okay, Blackie," Slattery said hopefully. "That's enough. Sit, boy, sit!" He reached hastily for his handcuffs, remembered they were in the Bronco, and smiled his thanks when Fickell ran up with hers.

"I'll do the honors," she said. "You'd better do something with Blackie—and fast!"

Slattery opened two packs of peanut butter crackers and sent the bear off in half a dozen directions. He then helped Fickell hustle her prisoner to the cruiser. Gordon kept saying, "Police bears, cheez!" As they passed the pine tree, a subdued, still shaky Woodrow Willison began castigating his former cellmate for having tried to incriminate him with the bow tie trick.

Gordon seemed genuinely surprised to see Willison and swore he hadn't been trying to get him into trouble. "Aw, I knew they'd never pin this job on you, Willie," he said. "I just wanted to see what it's like to have a really classy M.O." When Slattery asked him why he'd returned to the scene of the crime from Bennington Gap, he said, "I like it up here, don't you?"

At that point Fickell read him his rights and locked him in the cruiser cage. Slattery cornered Willison.

"By all rights," Slattery said, "I should arrest you for not reporting to your parole officer, you realize that?"

"Funny," Willison mused. "I was never afraid of heights before."

"Are you listening to me?" Slattery said. "You go see your parole officer first thing tomorrow. Then ask him to call me."

"Yes, sir," Willison said.

While all this was going on,

Jonas Letterman had been taking more snapshots than a busload of Japanese tourists on their first visit to Disneyland. "Mr. Slattery," he said, "how about that picture of you and Gretchen now?"

Slattery grudgingly agreed, and one shot led to another until both Fickell and Sugarfield were posing prettily with their arms around his waist. At that moment a familiar voice said, "Nice work if you can get it." Turning, Slattery saw his partner, Tom England. "Arnie asked me to swing by and see how you're doing," England smirked. "Looks to me like you're doing just fine."

Slattery introduced everyone, including the firemen, and Letterman snapped more photos.

"Looks like we have all the Kings forces here this morning," Letterman quipped. "And some of the city's as well."

Fickell put a hand on England's arm.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked.

"Just coffee," he said. "I wanted to get an early start."

"I don't think any of these people have eaten. Listen up, everybody," she said. "I think I can get the county to buy us all a good breakfast. Just give me thirty minutes or so to secure my prisoner and search his ve-

hicle, then we'll all meet over at Rusty's."

After the applause, Sugarfield said, "Can Woody come along? After all, he helped me get my bracelet back."

"Good idea," Slattery said. He looked at Willison. "That way I can keep an eye on you."

"Thanks," Willison said. "I'm sick and tired of my own cooking anyway."

Rusty was delighted with the crowd.

"Just look at all the protectors of the people," she beamed.

The protectors were in a good mood, too. "Don't worry, Joe," England said. "I won't tell Belcher that you've been trout fish-

ing and cavorting with beautiful women."

"At least I did what I came up here to do," Slattery said.

"He was just wonderful!" Sugarfield exclaimed.

"Never saw anything like it," said one of the firemen.

"I thought sure there'd be shots fired," Fickell said, "but the way Slattery handled it, Gordon was almost happy to be arrested." She giggled, then turned to Slattery. "Tell Tom all about it."

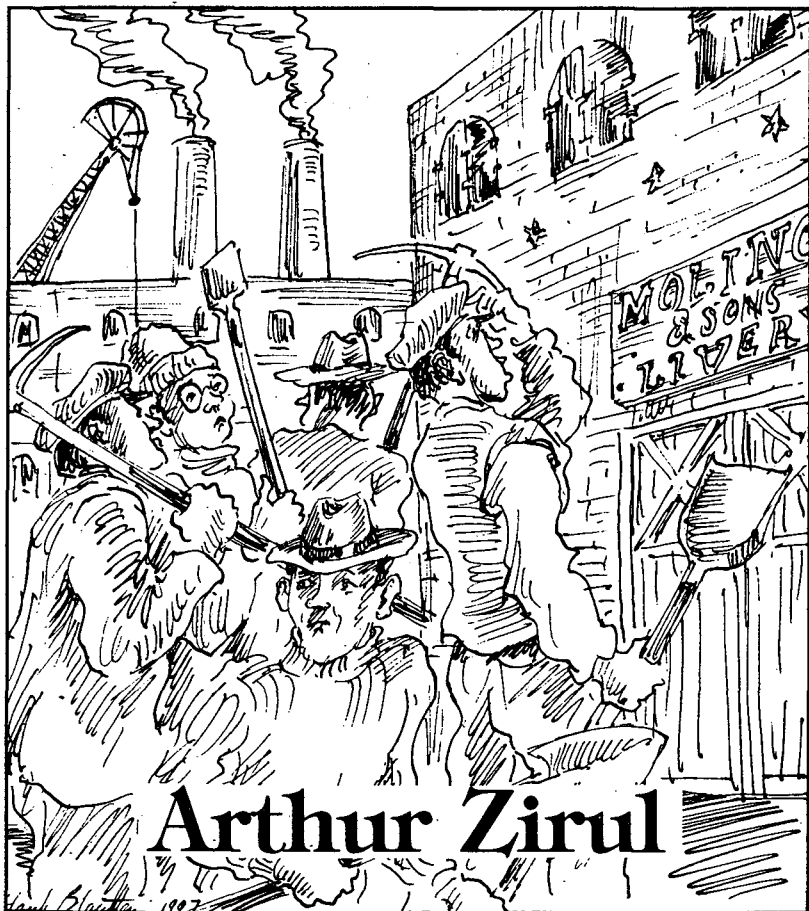
"Oh, I don't know," Slattery hedged. "It's a pretty involved story."

"Knowing your stories, I'll settle for the bare facts," England said, and wondered why everyone laughed.

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FICTION

Horseface Harry and the Treasure of Capone



Arthur Zirul

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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I was sitting at the regulars' table in the Bensonhurst Bar and Grill commiserating with the boys following a day's losses at Aqueduct when Horseface Harry came in whistling a happy tune. He was acting like a widow who'd won the lottery, and he said, "I have found a way to great riches, my good friends, and I have come to share it with you."

Louie the Gyp, Big Tooth Stanley, Smiley George, and Little Mario chuckled among themselves, and I just busted out laughing.

Harry seemed offended. "Why do you laugh, Marty?" he said. "Have I ever given you cause to regret my good intentions?"

"Indeed you have," I said. "Most recently when you sold me a used Cadillac with a burned-out transmission."

Harry waved his hand like he was shooing a fly and said, "Marty, my used-car lot deals in vintage vehicles at low prices, but I am not General Motors and I do not give guarantees or refunds. You have to expect to make some minor repairs yourself."

"Harry," I said, "I am aware that in cash transactions such as you promote we do not sign a lot of papers, but when my new used car began to cry in pain, the transmission was found to be filled with oatmeal. A trick

used to silence worn parts, I am told."

Big Tooth flashed his gold front tooth with the diamond in it and said, "Marty, we have all learned of Horseface Harry's little tricks with breakfast food. You do not buy a used car from Harry unless you are in dire straits."

"Exactly my condition," I said, "and I expect to receive some compensation from a person who now says he is my friend."

Harry patted my shoulder and said, "Marty, you will receive compensation beyond your wildest dreams—as will you all." He paused for effect. "I happen to know where Al Capone, the legendary mobster, has a considerable stash buried. Money old Al salted away before the government shipped him off to enjoy their penal system way back in 1931."

"You mean to tell us you found Al Capone's vault?" Smiley said, chortling loudly. "Geraldo Rivera, the TV guy, found that vault years ago in the basement of a Chicago hotel, and it was empty. Don't you watch no TV?"

"I do not concern myself with trivial pursuits," Harry said grandly. "If this Geraldo guy was looking in Chicago, he was looking in the wrong place. Capone hid a pile of his money right here in Brooklyn where no

one would ever think to look for it."

"You got that right," Smiley laughed, "and no one would think to look for it in Hackensack or Podunk neither, because old Al did his living and shooting in Chicago."

"Wrong," Harry said with a smug expression. "Old Al learned the gangstering trade as a youth right here on the streets of Brooklyn long before he ever seen Chicago."

"What part of Brooklyn?" Big Tooth asked.

To those who do not know, Brooklyn is divided into twenty-eight parts with names like Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Park Slope, Greenpoint, Flatbush, Crown Heights, and Canarsie—to name a few. Citizens of the various parts have been known to engage in bodily conflicts while discussing the respective merits of their neighborhoods.

"Capone operated out of Gowanus in the area of the Gowanus Canal itself," Harry said.

The Gowanus Canal is a not-too-desirable body of water, being a manmade barge canal in the north end of Brooklyn near the now defunct Brooklyn Navy Yard. In the old days it was known as a dumping ground for suddenly deceased individuals.

"Gowanus?" Louie the Gyp said. "Are you sure?"

"Bet my last dollar sure," Har-

ry said. "I found a real old relative of Capone's who is residing right here in Bensonhurst. He will draw me a map for a consideration that will show where Capone has a stash buried, somewhere in Gowanus."

"Hey," Smiley said, "how come the old guy's living in Bensonhurst if the treasure's in Gowanus?"

"A sharp observation," Harry said. "The old guy, and he's real old, like ninety, did indeed live in the vicinity of the treasure. But two years ago he broke his hip and had to come live in Bensonhurst with his son. Trouble is, last year his son died; he was pretty old himself, being in his seventies. Now the old guy has nobody left, and he can't keep an eye on the treasure no more. That's why he wants to make this deal. Money for a map."

Louie the Gyp shook his head. "Harry, don't tell me you gave this old guy money for a treasure map."

Harry winked. "Only a grand, but it is an investment that's as good as gold."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Louie sighed, "I cannot believe you fell for the Spanish Prisoner scam. That gag was old even before Ferdinand and Isabella hired Columbus."

Harry looked offended. "Do you see cider squirting out of my ears, Louie? I am familiar

with the con you speak of. I myself have done the play now and again, before I discovered the used-car business. I checked the facts of Capone's story in the great Brooklyn Central Library on Eastern Parkway, and they are as the old guy stated. You can't con a con, Louie—you should know that."

"Anybody can be had," Louie said. "In the old days the tale was that the poor old guy couldn't get to his treasure because he was being held prisoner by an evil Spanish king. Did this old guy also tell you he can't get to the treasure because he's an illegal alien or maybe even an alien from Mars, or he's wanted in five states and is on the lam?"

"Wrong on all counts," Harry said; his horseface, with its big teeth, was grinning from ear to ear.

Louie shook his head. "Harry, I know you been took. That old guy and your thousand clams are long gone by now."

"Is that a fact?" Harry said, wiseguy-like. "Well, when I say the deal's as good as gold, I speak the truth." He pulled a coin out of his vest pocket and tossed it on the table. It had the ring of old money when it landed, and it gleamed golden in the fluorescent lights. Big Tooth picked it up, sniffed it, tasted it, and whistled softly. "It's gold all right," he said. And if anybody

knows gold, it's Big Tooth Stanley.

Louie the Gyp took the coin from Big Tooth and squinted at it in deep concentration. "I am familiar with this piece," he said. "I deal in such items myself. It is a 1931 twenty-dollar standing Liberty gold coin in mint condition. Where'd you get it?"

"Giuseppe, that's the old guy's name, gave it to me as a token of good faith when I gave him my thousand bucks."

"You done good, Harry," Louie admitted grudgingly. "This is not only gold, it is also a very rare coin indeed. I know certain people in the all-night coin exchange business who will pay five thousand bucks for such an item, and no questions will be asked."

"Tell me something I don't know," Harry said. "Now, my old guy knows where there is a trunk full of similar items."

Louie scrunched up his nose. "A trunk full—geez, a shoebox full of such items would be worth millions. Why would the old guy want to give that away?"

"For one thing he does not know what he has. He thinks he's got a couple of hundred grand in twenty-dollar gold pieces. He really thinks those coins are worth only twenty dollars apiece."

"Is he stupid?" Big Tooth said.

"Like a lamppost," Harry said. "And the best part is, he's stuck in a wheelchair, all alone and depending on strangers for his welfare. All he wants to do is go back to Naples where he was born so he can die in peace. He'll trade that trunk full of rare coins for a hundred and fifty grand in cash and a ticket home."

The boys exchanged expressions of interest. Smiley asked, "How'd you find this prize sucker, Harry?"

"My mama found him," Harry said. "She has recently become involved in doing good deeds because she wants to be greeted warmly when she finally meets the Big Guy, as don't we all. Her good deeds involve delivering meals to old persons stuck at home."

"And did this poor old sucker," Louie said sarcastic-like, "did he tell her why Al Capone, of all people, would bury a treasure in gold coins in Brooklyn?"

"Well, Giuseppe said Al Capone was his cousin on his mama's side and they were one big happy family before Al moved to Chicago. After Capone got into trouble with the Feds out there, he sent money to his Brooklyn family to keep for him. He sent it in gold coins because the Depression had started and he didn't trust no paper money. The family put Giuseppe in charge of

the stash, and he's been guarding it as a matter of honor ever since."

"And the old guy told this classic tale to a total stranger just because she brought him some lasagna?" Louie said, frowning.

"Skinless boiled chicken," Harry said. "The old guy's on a special diet. And yeah, that's what lonely old guys do. They tell tales to anyone who will listen. Only this time he happened to tell his tale to my mama, and my mama knows a piece of action when she hears it. She taught me practically everything I know."

"Well, it sounds more and more like the Spanish Prisoner to me," Louie said.

"Oh, sure," Harry said. "When did you ever hear of anyone working the Spanish Prisoner by letting go of the sucker bait?" He retrieved his coin from Louie and held it high for all to see. "Old Giuseppe gave me this coin to seal the bargain when I handed him the thousand bucks. That's how those old guys used to do business. They exchanged tokens to show good faith. And now that I have that good faith, I figure I can get the old guy's considerable stash for one cent on the dollar. You boys want part of this action or not?"

The boys looked to Louie for an answer. Louie is our expert

on such matters, having at one time figured prominently on a Wanted poster in the post office.

"It's worth sniffing around," he said. "But first I want to see this old guy myself. I ain't buying no pig in no poke."

"You got a deal," Harry said. "I will set it up, but first you boys will have to ante up ten grand apiece to share in the pot."

I started laughing again, even harder this time. Big Tooth, Smiley, and Little Mario made comments about times being hard. Harry shrugged. "Gentleman, such a deal comes along once in a lifetime," he said. "You can beg, borrow, or rob your mama; maybe even get it from Max the Shark, but you get it and I promise you will all become citizens of great wealth. I myself am putting up a hundred grand, practically my net worth, since I intend to take eighty percent of the play."

"But that ain't fair!" Big Tooth said, caught up in the sales pitch. Louie, Smiley, and little Mario protested, too. I stayed cool. I haven't trusted Harry since my transmission died on Bay Parkway.

"That's the deal," Harry said. "Take it or leave it. I would not even be here if I had enough green to bankroll the operation myself."

"Well, I'm going to leave it," I said. "All my cash is tied up in

acquiring a new transmission with no horse food in it."

Harry put on a sad look. "As you wish, Marty, and to show there's no hard feelings, I'll pay you a hundred bucks to come along and lend muscle for the job. A trunk full of gold is very heavy."

My mama didn't raise no stupid children, so I grabbed the offer. Immediately, Louie, Big Tooth, Smiley, and Little Mario started to holler that they wanted to buy my share. There was some heated discussion around the table, and the matter was finally settled. At noon the next day Harry's four new partners were to show up with twelve thousand five hundred dollars apiece in good money. These funds, along with Harry's hundred grand, were to be deposited in a suitcase that would be put under Louie's watchful and suspicious eye until they had the treasure in hand. As agreed, all I had to bring was my muscles.

It was one o'clock the next day when we left the Bensonhurst Bar and Grill and climbed into one of Harry's cars, a real clunker from the back of his lot that was built in the days of cheap gas and high expectations. Its greatest virtue was its ability to hold six citizens easily and still navigate the potholed streets of Brooklyn without reducing its occupants to jelly. It was also,

considering its condition, of no interest to car thieves, a great asset in certain parts of our fair borough.

We left the bar at Sixty-ninth Street, and Harry drove down Twentieth Avenue to Gravesend Bay, where the old guy lived. Gravesend Bay is at the bottom of Bensonhurst and about a mile from Coney Island. When we got there, Harry pulled up in front of a dilapidated one story frame house with a sagging front porch. The house was in sight of the bay, and as we got out of the car, Harry pointed out over the water at the visible skyline of Coney Island and said, "It was right there in Coney, in a joint called the Harvard Inn, that Al Capone at the age of eighteen got those famous scars on his left cheek in a bar fight with one Frank Gallucio."

"You learned that in the library?" Little Mario asked.

"That and more," Harry said. "I do not swallow any story without checking all the facts first."

There's no moss growing on Harry.

"Giuseppe always sits back in the kitchen," Harry said. We walked around to the rear of the house, where he rapped hard on a raggedy screen door.

"Who that?" a weak old-guy voice called out.

"Giuseppe, it's me, Harry, your friend."

"Sì, sì, Harry," the voice answered. "Come in, come in."

We all shuffled into a gloomy kitchen that smelled of ripe things.

"Phew, open a window!" Smiley said. If the old man, sitting bundled up in a wheelchair, was offended by Smiley's remark, he didn't say anything. He just pointed at an assortment of rickety chairs and stools that surrounded a beat-up card-table and said, "Sit. Be comfortable." Then he started coughing and didn't stop. I went to the sink and brought him some water in a cracked glass. He sipped it and said, "*Mille grazie*." Finally he settled down and said, "So, now we talk a little, sì?"

Harry took the suitcase from Louie, which he had to pull hard to get it out of Louie's hands, and put it on the table. He opened it to show Giuseppe the neatly bundled stacks of money inside. Many stacks were bound with red rubber bands, which was the mark of Max the Shark.

Giuseppe looked at the money but made no move towards it. He just raised his eyes and said, "Ah, sì, for *il tesoro di Alphonso*."

"Alphonso's treasure," Little Mario translated.

"Alphonso?" Smiley asked.

"Capone's first name was Alphonse," Harry said. "Neapolitans have names like that."

When the old man heard Harry mention Naples, his face broke into a broad grin. It wasn't a pleasant sight to behold, as he had only two teeth in his mouth. One on top and the other on the bottom, and both were in front.

"Ah, Napoli. I go home now, sì?" He gestured at the money.

"Not until you deliver the merchandise, you don't," Louie said, closing the lid on the suitcase.

"Hey, Louie," Little Mario said, "don't rush the old guy. I got a grandpa just like him. They're lonely. They just want to talk."

"What the hell is there to talk about?" Louie said. "Either he got the coins or he don't."

Little Mario leaned forward and said loudly, "Did you know Mr. Capone well?"

"Ah, sì. We were *bambini* together, and we work together for Johnny Torrio."

"Johnny Torrio," Harry said, "he headed up the rackets in Brooklyn, and he just about invented organized crime as we know it." Harry was a regular tree of knowledge.

"I know whole Capone family," Giuseppe continued. "All seven brothers and the little sister Mafalda, too, but I know Alphonso best. He was like an older broth-

er to me. I stay with him until Johnny Torrio went to Chicago."

"Yeah, terrific," Louie said. "But what about . . ."

Little Mario raised his hand. "Let us not distress the old guy, Louie. He'll get around to it."

Giuseppe rambled on. "I was in St. Mary's church, down by the docks, when Alphonso marry Mae. She was Irish girl from Carroll Street. Right after that, Johnny Torrio send for Alphonso. Johnny need strong man in Chicago, and Alphonso was very strong."

"When was that?" Little Mario asked.

Giuseppe wrinkled his brow. "I remember Prohibition start and . . ."

"It was in 1921, and Capone was only twenty-two years old," Harry said, cutting the conversation short; he was getting antsy, too. "Now we must take care of business, Giuseppe. Do you have the map?"

"Ah, the map, sì, sì."

Giuseppe pulled a crumpled piece of paper from under his blanket and handed it to Harry, who smoothed it out on the table. It looked like every treasure map I ever saw in a movie. It even had a big X to mark the spot. The only difference was, instead of mountains and skulls for landmarks, there was the names of streets in Gowanus: Douglass, Butler, and Nevins.

The X was marked on Nevins Street, on the right bank of the Gowanus Canal.

I was familiar with the area. It was composed mainly of tired industrial buildings and row houses dating back to the days of sailing ships. Dealings in various happiness products are not unknown there.

"Harry, I think maybe you should pick up a few armed guards if we are to venture into this area and dig up a trunk full of gold," I said.

"Worry not," Harry said. "I am prepared for any inconvenience." He patted his left arm-pit. I assumed that meant he was packing a piece. The other boys made similar moves. It seems I was the only one traveling light.

"Okay, gentlemen, let's go," Harry said, pocketing the map and picking up the suitcase like he was going to leave with it.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Well, now that we have the map, why give this green to the old geezer at all?" Harry said, sounding like he'd just suckered another used-car customer. "What's he going to do about it?"

"That wouldn't be right," I said. "You guys exchanged tokens. You made a deal."

"What are you butting in for?" Harry snapped at me. "All you put in this deal was complaints about a perfectly good Cadillac."

I was about to open my mouth again when Little Mario piped up with, "Marty's right. You exchanged tokens, and it wouldn't be right to stiff the old guy. It would be like stiffing my own grandpa." Fortunately for Giuseppe, Little Mario understood matters of honor.

Big Tooth and Smiley agreed; they had grandpas, too. After a minute Harry did his shoo-fly act. "Okay, okay," he said impatiently, "have it your way. This money is small change anyway compared to the treasure. But somebody has to stay here with it until we get back, just in case there is some hanky-panky."

Everybody looked at Louie, who had been in charge of the money all along.

"Well, Louie, looks like you're elected," Harry said. "You will hold down the fort until we come back, okay?"

It was not okay with Louie, but the others managed to convince him. As we were leaving, Louie pulled an automatic of .45 caliber persuasion from his belt and laid it on top of the case. He looked real hard at us and said, "Anybody tries to shaft me, they will regret it. Ain't *nobody* getting this green until I see those coins—and I better see those coins!"

The matter being settled, Harry yelled, "Leave us go and get

rich!" We all went out to the car and piled in.

Harry drove back up Twentieth Avenue to Bensonhurst's main drag, Eighty-sixth Street, where he turned left and traveled under the elevated train tracks, swooshing between the steel columns, until he reached New Utrecht Avenue, where he headed north towards Red Hook and Gowanus. Harry could have taken the Belt Parkway, but he avoided such convenient express routes. He liked bouncing over tar-covered trolley tracks in the guts of Brooklyn. He said it brought back childhood memories.

Harry turned left at Thirtieth Street and took it to Fifth Avenue, where he turned right. After about a mile of driving past blocks of row houses, storefronts, and a really big cemetery, we passed Twentieth Street, and Harry said, now sounding like a Coney Island tour guide, "Right down that block was the Adonis Club, where Al Capone did shoot and kill one Pegleg Lonergan, a Brooklyn mobster, on Christmas Day in 1925, and that's when he was just visiting Brooklyn for old times' sake."

There were appropriate gee-whiz comments from the assemblage.

About a mile farther on, when we passed another block, Harry pointed and said, "That's Gar-

field Place; the Capone family resided at number 21." Three blocks later, at Union Street, Harry turned left. As we went through the busy intersection at Union and Fourth Avenue, Harry nodded at a corner. "Right there, on the second floor, was Johnny Torrio's headquarters, where the young Al Capone hung out."

By this time we were all getting pretty fed up with Harry's travelogue, so nobody bothered to look up or to listen.

Things began to get real seedy as we approached the Gowanus Canal, which we could smell a block before we got there. We had traveled almost six miles from Gravesend Bay and were still four miles from the Queens border, which should give you a some idea just how big Brooklyn is. Harry headed for the two story building on Nevins Street that was marked on the map. The place was old and beat-up, but it had steel shutters over all the windows and doors that kept it more or less protected. There was a faded sign on the building that said MOLINO & SONS, LIVERY.

"Molino," Smiley said. "Why is that name familiar to me?"

"Oh yeah, that's Giuseppe's last name," Harry said. "This must be his family's place."

"If this is his place, what did

he need a map for?" Big Tooth asked.

"I told you he was no Einstein," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, I know I seen that name Molino someplace else," Smiley persisted.

"It's not an uncommon name in Brooklyn," Little Mario observed. "You could have seen it anywhere."

Harry pulled up to the curb, the tires crunching on broken glass, and we got out. Harry opened the trunk and distributed a variety of digging tools to us all. I ended up with a pointy-end spade. Harry opened a rusty padlock on the front door with a key Giuseppe'd given him. The building was dark inside, so Harry lit up two battery lanterns he'd brought along. You gotta give Harry credit. He plans ahead. The building had a dirt floor, and there were piles of hard round objects in the corners—petrified horse droppings. This place really must have been a stable back in 1931.

Harry looked at his map. "The trunk is buried dead center in the floor, right over there." He pointed at a spot in the dirt.

"Hey, Harry," Big Tooth said, kicking at the earth. "It looks as if somebody's already dug here."

"The old guy told me he used to dig down every once in a while to make sure the treasure was still there," Harry said. "He

really took his job serious. Now let's get to work, I don't want to be here after dark."

Harry started giving orders like an army general, and we all began throwing dirt around with our shovels.

"I think I'll buy me a Rolls-Royce; I always wanted one of those," Little Mario said as he worked.

"I'm buying an island in the Bahamas," Big Tooth said.

"I'm buying my mama a condo in Florida," Harry said. "The old lady deserves it for this trick."

Smiley and me, we didn't say nothing. I had nothing to add to their conversation, and Smiley couldn't stop smiling.

A couple of feet down my shovel hit something that went clunk. We all dug faster, and we were soon able to get at the handles of a buried steamer trunk.

Forgetting how heavy a trunk full of gold would be, Little Mario and Big Tooth grabbed hold of the handles and heaved, and that trunk just popped out of its hole.

Harry flipped open the locks and flung the cover back. The trunk was loaded with round cardboard boxes that had the picture of a smiling Quaker on them. Little Mario picked one up and read the label: "Oatmeal," he said. "It says oatmeal!"

Harry screamed so loud you

would've thought he was shot. He kept pulling boxes out of the trunk and tearing them open, scattering oatmeal all over the place. In the excitement no one noticed the note taped to the inside of the trunk lid. I pulled it off and read it. "It's for you Harry," I said. Harry looked up, his eyes wild. "It says, 'Since you like oatmeal so much I got you a trunk full. Next time don't use it on my mama's car.'"

It was signed "Louie."

"Hey!" Smiley yelled. "Now I remember! Molino is Louie the Gyp's real name. I saw it on that Wanted poster in the post office. He must be related to the old guy!"

"I'll kill him!" Harry hollered as he pulled out his gun and ran for the door. Little Mario and Big Tooth made similar comments as we ran after Harry. The ride back to Gravesend Bay was a memorable one indeed. Not only did Harry take the expressways, he also broke all the speed limits. Lucky for us, considering all the iron the boys were carrying, it was during the cops' afternoon coffee break, a sacred ritual in Brooklyn.

Needless to say, when we got back to the old guy's house, both he and Louie the Gyp were gone, and on the kitchen table was another note. It said, "Me and my mama and my great-grandpa will send you a card from Na-

ples. *Ciao*." It was signed "Louie."

Harry was a broken man after that. He neglected his business and started talking to himself.

It wasn't losing the money that bothered him so much as being taken in a con. The oldest con in the business yet. A month later he ended up running off a cliff in Brooklyn Heights in one of his used cars, one that had no brakes. Big Tooth, Little Mario, and Smiley were not happy campers neither, what with Max the Shark coming after them, but I calmed their fears by telling them that Louie promised me he would return all their money.

The whole con was my idea from the start. I just wanted to fix Harry good so he would know he can't get away with screwing up transmissions all over Brooklyn—especially mine. I told Louie my tale, and he said he was all for stinging Harry because Harry had also cheated Louie's mama. It was Louie who came up with the Capone angle because his great-grandpa really did live in Gowanus and he knew all about Al Capone's early days. Even better, the old guy owned the building we used for the sting. Louie also tipped Harry's mama to Giuseppe, the old guy in Bensonhurst who needed her services. Giuseppe was the star

of the show, though. He played his part like a pro. I suspect he'd worked scams with Louie before.

Of course, Louie wasn't supposed to run off with the money like he did, especially my cut, but I'm not worried. You see, I picked Harry's pocket and got back Louie's twenty dollar gold

piece, which I sent to him in Naples.

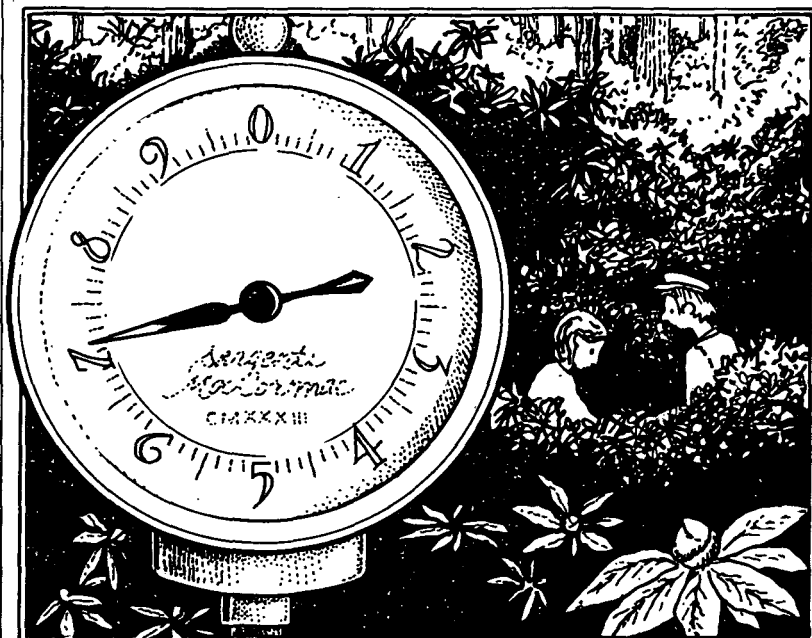
In return, Louie sent me a medallion of St. Januarius, the patron saint of Naples, and he made a solemn promise to send back our money. I'm sure that I can trust him, I mean, we exchanged tokens, didn't we?

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

Algernon was the friar who couldn't resist stealing the gem-encrusted reliquary from the altar.

ORDER	NAME	PROVINCE	HEIGHT	AGE	HAIR
1	Bertrand	Marche	72"	63	brown
2	Gervais	Burgundy	68"	66	black
3	Algernon	Champagne	70"	69	red
4	Emile	Lorraine	66"	73	black
5	Clément	Île-de-France	73"	65	brown
6	François	Normandy	65"	72	red
7	Denis	Poitou	69"	70	gray

MYSTERY CLASSIC



Summertime Adventure

David Walker

Geordie MacTaggart had to sit quiet for twenty minutes after his supper. It was a rule. Time dragged along like a tortoise this August evening, and he was just thinking after fifteen that he might slide off safely now, when his mother came out and sat beside him. She was no featherweight, and the bench creaked.

"What's on your mind, my wee warrior?"

Geordie grunted. He knew from the look on her face that she knew from his face he had been up to something. There were no flies on Mum. "Here's Dad now," she said, which was lucky.

Geordie's father was keeper and stalker at Drumfechan, and Friday was his evening for seeing the laird. He whistled a tune as he came back through the wood. It was a pipe tune called "The Barren Rocks of Aden." Well, he wouldn't be whistling a lively march if there was trouble in his mind.

A good sign, Geordie hoped, but he was not so sure when Dad said, "The laird's wantin' Geordie."

"The laird—what for does the laird want our Geordie?"

Dad shrugged his big shoulders in his best knickerbocker suit.

"Don't ask me. I was just coming away when he says, 'George in residence this evenin'?' So I says, 'Ay.' And he says, 'Ask the dear boy to spare me a minute of his invaluable time. Wanta discuss the state of Denmark.'" Dad could do a good copy of the laird's talk. So could Geordie, only he wasn't allowed to.

"Was you and the laird talking about Denmark, Geordie?"

"No," Geordie said. "One time I seen the laird he asked what jography we was doing in the school, but I says Canada."

"Och, well," said Mum. "It'll be the laird wantin a chat with his pal, or it'll mebbe just be some daft notion."

"Now, now." Dad meant less of that about the laird's daft notions in front of Geordie—as if everybody didn't know the laird was daft.

"Come ben the house," Mum said, "and we'll get you dressed respectable."

So, in a few minutes, Geordie was wearing a necktie and clean boots and his green and brown jacket made out of Dad's old Drumfechan tweed.

"Mind you say sir," called Dad from the supper table.

Geordie knocked on the kitchen door at the big house. "Come in," said Mistress Robertson, who was cook. "Oh, it's you," she said. There was bad feeling between Geordie and Mistress Robertson on

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account of a water booby trap he set for her on the coal-shed door last week. It worked lovely.

"The laird's wantin' me," Georgie said.

Mistress Robertson sniffed and went away and came back. "The laird will see you," she said, very stuck-up.

The laird of Drumfechan was looking out of the study window when Georgie went in. He had his droopy kilt on, faded to the color of old rope. He was a very tall, scraggy man with wide mustaches.

"Hullo, George," he said, and this side of his mustaches wagged.

"Hullo, sir," said Georgie, wondering what about Denmark, or what.

"Damned envious witch—I should have said bitch," the laird was muttering to himself. "Tut-tut, man! Watch your language." He turned round. "Bit of trouble, George. Fact is, old What's-er-name's been complaining about you by telephone. Says Reid caught you poaching the Reekie. True or false?"

Old What's-er-name was the laird of Drumfechan's neighbor and arch-enemy. He hardly ever called her by her right name, which was Miss McIlreekie of McIlreekie.

"I didn't even have the rod up," Georgie said. "I was just taking a wee walk and a look about."

"Admiring the scenery, doubtless. Well, George, I didn't like to mention it to your father, knowing his somewhat old fashioned views in the matter of trespass, et cetera. Did Reid ambush you?"

"Yes," Georgie said. "I thoct he was away up the hill this forenoon, and he wasn't."

The laird gave a huge laugh. "What did he say?"

"He said, 'Next time I'll cut out yer liver 'n' lights,'" Georgie quoted.

"What? He said that? Horrible fat lowland feller. I never did like him." The laird's face went darker red, almost purple, which was a sign he was vexed. "Mark my words, George, if he does that to you, I'll—I'll disembowel the rascal—yes, personally degizzard him with relish. Dreadful thing to say to a boy." Mumble, mumble. The laird cooled off. "Anything worth seeing?"

"There's a muckle trout in the Black Pool. It's a whopper."

"How big, boy—how big?" cried the laird.

Georgie showed the size with his hands.

"Oh, I say, a veritable behemoth!" But the laird sighed. He stood for a long time, looking out the window again, quiet, as if he was thinking. "Remarkable coincidence, George, y'know," he said final-

ly, "but when I was a boy—about twelve would I have been; yes, your own age—I caught a monster in that selfsame pool—five pounds two ounces."

"The laird would have had permission?"

"Permission? Not on your life! I caught it sub rosa with my own skill and subterfuge by honorable poaching means. Know what I caught it on, George?"

Geordie shook his head.

"Wasp maggots," hissed the laird. "Best bait in Christendom." He bent down over Geordie like some whiskery old storkbird. "Dropped a few in as ground bait to whet his appetite. Then gave him my offering with supreme delicacy and skill. Wham, gazeeka, he took it! Ever use wasp maggots, George?"

"Whiles," said Geordie. "They're kind of ticklish to get, though."

"Oh, not too bad. A veil, a puff of smoke, a spade and, owl, beside me stinging in the wilderness." He was very daft this evening. "Use my bee things any time. You know where they are, dear boy—by the hives."

"Thanks," said Geordie.

"Now, George," the laird said in a different voice altogether. He could be fierce. "I sent for you to administer a rebuke. My relations with Miss What's-er-name are abominable enough already without George MacTaggart adding fuel to the fire. I will not tolerate poaching habits. Understand?" He glared at Geordie, puffing out his narrow cheeks and wide mustaches.

"Yes, sir," said Geordie.

"We have trout of our own in plenty. Not monsters, I admit but self-respecting fish any ordinary feller would be proud to catch. I mean we can't all break records, can we, George? That's what records are for, eh, George?"

"Yes, sir . . . no, sir." The laird's machine-gun talk always got Geordie muddled. But under being muddled he was looking at the toes of his good boots, and he was thinking, Five pounds two ounces. I bet this yin's bigger. And he was thinking, Twelve years of age the laird says he was. Geordie tried to make a picture of the laird when he was twelve, but he couldn't; he just couldn't imagine it somehow.

"I say, George!" The laird stared down at him, frowning. "Haven't been too severe, have I? Didn't upset you?"

"Och, no," said Geordie. "I was just thinking."

The laird gave a huge laugh again. "Well, keep out of trouble, and

don't be downhearted about that trout. This other Eden, demi-paradise, where hangs a monster apple, where hangs out a venomed Eve. Off you go, old feller."

He waited at the window. Sure enough Geordie appeared, moving at a brisk trot in the direction of the beehives, looking neither to right nor left. The laird watched his friend with admiration. "Such terrifying fixity of purpose," he said aloud as was his solitary wont. "Small of stature, but mighty of heart. Big things will come of that boy yet." Then the laird felt guilty. "What an old scoundrel I am," he muttered. "But what a trout it was."

The wasps' bike was in a hole in the ground. "You do the smokin'," Geordie commanded. "I'll do the diggin'."

So he dug, and Jean Donaldson, who was the gardener's daughter, she puffed smoke out of the bee smoker to make the wasps dopey. They had veils on, and gloves, and two pairs of their fathers' long underwear over everything. The trouble wasn't the wasps inside. The trouble was late travelers returning in the gloaming and not liking the idea of their home being dug up. Geordie and Jean had not been able to wait for dark because of bedtime.

So he dug fast. Jean gave a yelp whenever she was stung through her double underwear. Geordie grunted at the first one; then he just clenched his teeth and dug like a sweaty demon in extra clothes and veil until he reached two big slabs of the light, spongy, wafery combs. "Come away then!" And they ran for safety in an angry wasp buzz. They ran until there were no wasps left except the ones crawling on them.

"Aa-ow-ow!" cried Jean with a shudder and shake, and she burst into tears.

"Here, let's take a look at ye," Geordie said. He found three at her legs and several on her veil. "Greetin'!" he said sternly. "What's there to greet about in a wasp sting?"

"It wasn't a wasp sting, it was five, and ilka one like a red-hot knife stuck into me."

"Five! I've ten."

"I knew fine, perfect wee Geordie would have twice as mony." But she searched him for wasps as well as she was able in the half-light, and only snuffled a few times to show she had been crying.

"It was nine I had," he confessed on the way home, unveiled. "Not ten. How's yours, Jean?"

"Just throbbing. How's yours?"

"So, so. Ammonia, that's the stuff to sort them. Mum has it in the kitchen. Does yours?"

"Och ay," she said, and paused. "What for was the hurry to get wasp maggots, Geordie?"

Jean was only eleven and a lassie, so he didn't let her into everything. But he was thinking now that he might be needing Jean's help, so he said, "It's special. I'll tell you the morn's morn." Then he thought: Yes, I'll need her. He said, "There's not many lassies would keep on smokin' and gettin' stung the way you done."

"Och, away," she said, meaning "nonsense," but all buttered up and pleased as Punch.

Geordie was out and up the hill by seven next morning. He found a place in deep old heather and lay there till he saw what he hoped to see. Then he hurried home with a rare big appetite to sup his porridge.

"What are you after doing the day?" Mum asked as per usual every morning of the summer holidays.

"I'm not just sure yet," Geordie answered as per usual. He was pretty sure, though.

He split some kindling for her; then he got away. You never knew where the laird mightn't pop up unexpected—inspecting his trees or watching some bird or just mooching as he called it. It was important not to be seen by the laird this morning. So Geordie took the Secret Path which he had made himself through the darkest woods. It was the kind of path you were a Red Indian flitting like a shadow along it and expecting other Red Indians in war paint at every corner.

When he was below Jean's house, he made the quiet whistle. It was the call of the bullfinch—two plain deep notes but louder than a real bullfinch with his bonny red chest and his cocky black head.

Jean came. "What's on, Geordie?" she whispered in the whispery place.

He told her.

"But you can't, Geordie! Not after Beefy Reid catchin' you yesterday, and the laird saying you wasn't to poach. Och, Geordie!" Jean was a year younger and two inches taller, so she looked down at him, sort of worried and excited, too, because Geordie might be smaller, but he was the boss.

"Five pounds two ounces was the fish the laird took when the laird was twelve. I'll bet a million billion trillion quadrillion this

yin's bigger." Geordie was the kind of person who, once he gets an idea into his head, it grows and grows, and he can think of nothing but "five pounds two ounces" until he tries to do whatever it may be. "Besides," he continued, "I saw Beefy away up the hill early. So Auld Beaky's the only one we're needing to watch out for." Geordie gave Jean a look. "I'll go on my lonesome," he remarked. "I'm no wantin' skeery lassies."

"Who says I'm skeery?" She had her hands on her hips, and she swayed from side to side, and her face was as red as the bullfinch.

"Keep yer hair on."

They moved up the low woods of the glen. The path was close above the road. They had not gone far when who should come purring along in her Rolls-Royce 1926 limousine, swish-swish, the old black gleaming box on wheels, with the chauffeur in front and herself behind like the Queen of England, but Auld Beaky McIlreekie. In the pictures you saw, the queen waved at people. Not so Auld Beaky. She just stared over her great bony nose as if nobody else existed. Come to think of it, if you had a nose like that between your eyes to look past, it would be hard ever to forget it enough even to notice other folk: Auld Beaky was a holy terror. Everyone at Drumfechan agreed about that.

"Good riddance," Geordie said.

"Ta-ta, my bonny Beaky darlin'," Jean sang.

They both felt better as they came to the Reekie. Downstream—except for one disputed stretch—Miss McIlreekie owned the left bank, and the laird owned the right bank. But here the Reekie climbed fair and square into McIlreekie land—or ran down out of it, whichever way. High up the hill it was a burn; lower it was a river; here it was not big enough to be a real river and not small enough to be a real burn, so it was never called either. It was called the Reekie.

They looked about them. Nobody was in sight. Geordie and Jean climbed the eight foot fence, less of a fence to hold red deer than a sign that the laird and Auld Beaky were mortal enemies.

They crept up through rhododendrons beside the bonny Reekie. It was the kind of stream that you could dream about and never be lucky enough to find unless you were Geordie and Jean off poaching on a summer morning. Loud water and quiet water and dark water and white water. The wagtail flounced his long, long tail, and flashed yellow to another wet black rock. Rabbits chased one another hoppity-hop up there outside their sandy burrows. Sunshine

brightened this to darken that. Oh, the merry Reekie. Peaceful, too, for law-abiding folk.

They lay on their stomachs at the Black Pool. Nothing moved. The water was clear but peaty-dark, except in just one place where a sun shaft struck slantwise to a boulder six foot below the surface.

"Under the ledge," Geordie whispered. "Yonder's where he lies."

"I canna see him." Doubting Jean.

"There!" A stubby torpedo, lazily forward, two flicks of the tail, sink back.

"Oh-h! He's huge! He's the hugest I ever seen!"

The brown trout—it could not be a salmon here above the falls of Reekie—was even bigger than Geordie had thought yesterday.

He undid the rod cover, had his old rod up in a jiffy and the reel on, and was threading the line when he thought of what he should have thought of sooner.

"See yon tree?" A big one high on the bank. "Climb it. Watch up the way and down the way. If anybody comes, blow the loud whistle. Keep yer eyes skinned."

"Beefy's up the hill. Auld Beaky's away into toon. Nobody else would come. What's the need?"

"Do as I tell ye."

Jean grumbled off to do his bidding up the tree.

"Ground bait," the laird had said. So Geordie opened the tin and broke a bit off the comb and extracted maggots carefully. He lay down again with his eye peeking round a rock. Ground bait could be a help, but it wasn't nearly so important as not being seen. He threw one in and watched the whiteness dim as it sank. Too far upstream. He threw another. Too low. It took him five to get the right spot. The fifth maggot slanted down with the lazy current, going, going, nearly gone—and there it was, white again in the one shaft of sun. "Wham!" as the laird had said. Goodbye, maggot.

Geordie MacTaggart fed that trout. He fed that trout just enough to make it ravenous for excellent wasp maggots. Quick now!

He found the very best ones—still white but come to the legs and shape of a wasp. They were such soft lifeless things you could hardly imagine them as stingers in a day or two if they had been luckier. They were a grand bait with a bad disadvantage—so tender that the least thing tore them off the hook.

Geordie fixed them in a lovely white bunch right round and up the shaft. He put on a small sinker. He let bait and sinker and gut gently into the water. Not enough weight. Another sinker.

He knew that the best chance of getting this cunning old trout was that the bait should come not too high and not too low right to his nose the very first time. Geordie was not much of a fly fisherman yet, but he was as good a bait-using boy of twelve as you could find in Scotland or England or America or Canada or any trout country. Five pounds two ounces, he was saying to himself as the giant of the Reekie gobbled his hook.

It sounds easy, but it wasn't. It sounds lucky, and it was. Geordie had so many things to do in the next twenty minutes that he did not have time to be thinking how clever he was or lucky. The trout was far too big for his light tackle. The line screamed up and the line screamed down. Was he running out of the pool? No, back again. Reel in like lightning, get back what you can. Easy on him. There he goes again. Watch that snag! Watch it!

"He's getting tired the now," came Jean's light voice from up the tree.

"Dinna look at me!" Geordie shouted as loud as he was able, panting, his arms like red-hot ton weights. The trout had dashed the first dash out of itself. It rested now across the Reekie, waiting.

The loud whistle, the piercing alarm Geordie had taught Jean to blow, fingers behind teeth; then Jean's voice again, "Auld Beaky's comin' doon yonder bank wi' yon wee bitch!"

Excellent clear message. Terrible news of Beaky back from town. Where? Where? One place only—between those two rocks below. And the rod? Sink it, reel and all.

Geordie lay in shallow water hidden by the rocks, arms stretched forward and down, rod pointed to the depths. What happened when you played a fish the wrong way round, from down below to up above? What about these queer submarine tugs and trembles?

Now he could hear Auld Beaky's footsteps. "Sheena!" she called, hoity-toity like the laird's voice, but it was the Holy Terror's. "Come he-ah to heel, you naughty little bunny-chasing thing, at once!"

Geordie hung on like grim death, feeling a change in what was happening topsy-turvy underwater. What happened at the surface was a loud splash. Then Sheena, the West Highland terrier, the wee bitch, yapped her head off. "A brown trout jumping like a salmon, and at such an unnatural angle! Now stop it, Sheena! I will not have you swimming after trout much larger than yourself." Mumble-mumble. "I don't wonder that wretched MacTaggart boy came poaching." Mumble. "Called me an envious witch. I'll teach the gangling fool." Goodbye, Auld Beaky.

Half an hour later Geordie stranded the trout in shallows, and faithful Jean, summoned from her treetop, lay upon it while he found the right kind of stone to hit a monster on the head.

They retired into rhododendrons, where he took down his rod. He was pretty well tired out, but he was strong for his limited size, with good big lungs, and in a few minutes he felt better. They were wet, but it was warm.

They stole down beside the bonny Reekie, from bush to bush, from pool to pool, from tree to tree, from ruffle to ruffle—careful, silent, successful poachers. No sign of Auld Beaky McIlreekie. They scaled the fence.

“Och, Geordie!” said Jean in the friendly woods. “Yon was braw!”

“You did fine,” Geordie said, giving well-earned praise. He held up his trout for a good look. With the big head it wasn’t perhaps a very bonny trout, but it was the bonniest, hugest trout he had ever seen.

“What’s to be done with it?” Jean was usually the one who thought of things first. “You can’t take it home, can ye?”

“No,” he said. “I can’t.” Dad knew the size of the tiddlers in the hill burn. And he knew there were no big ones in the lower Reekie. Dad and Mr. Beefy Reid were not excellent pals by any means, everybody being mixed up in the bad blood, so to speak. But Dad’s ideas about poaching were something else again.

“Could ye sell it?”

“I’m not wantin’ for to sell it.” Here he had caught mebbe the biggest trout in all Scotland, and he couldn’t even take it home. That was a bad feeling to have.

“There’s just the one thing we can do.”

“What’s that?”

“We’ll make a fire and fry it up and eat it to wer dinner. That’s what, Geordie.”

“We couldn’t. We couldn’t manage a trout yon size.”

“Two feasts, then, we can have.”

“What am I to say, though? Mum expects me.” Geordie had done a lot this morning. Perhaps he had done the biggest thing in all his life, and he didn’t have many ideas left in him.

“Just say, ‘I’m having my dinner up Jean’s way.’ And I’ll say, ‘I’m having my dinner down Geordie’s way.’ And that’ll be the truth, sort of. Now mind you say it right. Can you get bread, Geordie?”

“I’ll try,” he said, a bit bamboozled by this gafuffle. He looked at the trout, and he looked at it, and he looked at it.

“I’ll get butter and a pan. Meet you at the island.”

*

The island was one of the chief causes of, and excuses for, hostilities between Drumfechan and McIlreekie. Right bank yours, left bank mine, had been the immemorial rule. But one spring spate in ancient rumored time, the Reekie changed its course, making a savage loop into Drumfechan land. Then, in slightly less distant, but dimly recorded days, the Reekie changed back to the status quo ante. Some springs ago it had sought an unhappy mean and forked, making a true but troublous island.

Litigation foundered in expense. The laird built a footbridge over the right channel; Miss McIlreekie built one over the left—symbols of ownership. But they avoided the place, a mere sight being enough to stir up passion. Only in times of burning acrimony did their several walks take them past the island. Mostly it was left to pigeons, pheasants, rabbits, and mallard. Hence the wooded island was an excellent place for the more private occasions of Georgie and Jean.

He put hook into gills and waited for the pointer to steady. "Seven pounds six ounces," he said. What a feeling that was.

"Seven pounds six and a wee tiny bit," said Jean. "Clean it then, Georgie," she added, keen to be at the cooking.

So Georgie cleaned his famous fish, which had two small trout as well as wasp maggots in its belly. "We'll eat the tail half first," he said, rightfully his decision. That's that, he thought quite sadly, chopping through with his sharp knife and sliding the longer half into the pan, and he said, "It's great catching a muckle fish, but then it's not there to catch again. And once it's eaten, then it's eaten. See what I mean, Jean?"

"Ay," she said, turning it with his knife a first time in the melted butter. "I see what you mean, Georgie."

They had a fire of dry sticks, so there was hardly any smoke and lots of heat, and it began to frizzle and sizzle and smell just lovely. "Are you hungry, Jean?"

"I wasn't," she said. "Now I am."

"Me too," Georgie said. "I'm fair watering at the mouth."

Ready. Jean eased the top bit off the backbone and divided it in two, and then they were eating browned, buttery fried trout on bread and butter. Their own trout.

A pigeon coo-cooed from an island tree. The sun shone in on them down here. Nobody to say, "Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Was thinkin'," said Jean, with hers. "Jes-thinkin' what laird'd've bin like when laird's twelve. Couldn't."

"Same here," said Geordie. "And it's two pounds four ounces bigger than the laird's trout was when the laird was twelve. I'd've liked fine for the laird to see it." A cloud the size of a man's hand over the perfection of this island dinner. The uncooked half lay in a shady place on moss. The second half of the cooked half was in their hands on home-baked bread and home-churned butter.

"Auld Beaky's the one who should have seen it," Jean said. "What say we wrap the head up in tissue paper and put it in a box in another box in another box in another box and thick string with a hundred knots and post it to Auld Beaky McIlreekie?"

They were considering this brilliant inspiration of Jean's when yaps sounded from McIlreekie side, and an even worse sound—splashings. "It's yon wee bitch."

Still worse—splashings also from Drumfechan.

"Sheena, you little scamp, come back!"

"Heel, Buster, hellhound! Heel, sir!"

The laird's Labrador had longer legs. He arrived first at the source of that delicious smell, wafted hither and yonder by the fitful airs of an August day. Sheena came a moment later.

They tried shooing them and they tried hushing them, while the owners shouted. It was terrible. The only hope seemed to be feed them. Jean was feeding trout to Buster, and Geordie was feeding trout to Sheena when footsteps sounded on both bridges. The laird of Drumfechan and Miss McIlreekie arrived at either side of the clearing. There had not even been time to hide the half with the fine big head on it.

The laird stared. Auld Beaky stared. Buster and Sheena asked for more. Geordie and Jean stood slowly up, bread in hand.

"Well, I'll be—"

"Merciful heavens!"

Then the extraordinary thing happened. The laird started cackling his huge laugh. Auld Beaky's tweeds began to shake all over. And there they were in a minute with the tears of laughter pouring down their cheeks.

"We got it," mumbled Geordie guiltily with pride.

"How heavy, George?"

"Seven pounds six ounces," he said. "Jean's witness."

"Seven pounds six and a wee tiny bit," Jean stated.

"I saw an enormous trout jump most peculiarly as I came down the Reekie," mused Auld Beaky. She didn't seem quite such a holy terror at the moment.

"Jean was sentry up a tree," Geordie explained, "and I was hooked into it from underneath."

They thought that funny, too.

"A fishy feast indeed," said the laird of Drumfechan. "You'd better cook the rest and eat it. We'll watch."

"I couldn't," Geordie said. "I'm full to the back teeth."

"Me too," said Jean.

"Would the laird and Aul—and Miss McIlreekie mebbe like a wee taste if we fried it up?" he offered politely.

"Not fried, dear boy; I simply daren't."

"Nor I, thank you so much, George."

"You could take it home and boil it if you wanted." It was her fish in a manner of speaking.

"Would you like to share—" began Miss McIlreekie, and stopped.

"That's exceedingly kind—" began the laird, and stopped.

They looked at each other for a minute as if they mightn't be such natural deadly enemies after all. Then they both gave a sort of shake to their heads and coughed and looked away.

"No intended rudeness, George," said Auld Beaky briskly. "But these cannibal trout aren't particularly good."

"It tasted just fine," Geordie and Jean protested together.

"Of course it did," said the laird. "Cannibals eat nice little trout, don't they? Ergo!"

"If you ate Geordie and Jean, would you be any the less stringy?"

"Perfectly revolting remark." The laird turned angrily on his heel. But he turned back. "Stringy yourself," he said. "Female Cassius, lean and hungry. Let me have hags about me that are fat."

They disappeared in opposite directions with leashed dogs.

"I was thinking, Jean," said Geordie later. "One minute there I thought the laird and her was quite pally with one another; then they kind of shook themselves and the next minute at it hammer and tongs in double-dutch again. Queer, eh?"

"Would it mebbe be like what you said about catching the trout, Geordie? Once they'd stopped the squabbles, then they wouldn't have the squabbles for to think about and keep them happy. Would that be it?"

"Could be," Geordie said. "Grownups is all daft."

"Ay," said Jean, "and they're the daftest."

So that was the best day Geordie and Jean ever had when she was eleven and he was twelve.



BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Fans of Mary Higgins Clark will enjoy Iris Johansen's latest, **And Then You Die . . .** (Bantam, \$22.95), a super-charged thriller with a feisty female protagonist, a deadly mystery man, and a sinister terrorist plot that threatens thousands of lives. Photojournalist Bess Grady reluctantly accepts an assignment from a travel magazine to do a feature on a remote village deep in Mexico. It should be a healing change of pace from the brutality she has witnessed in war-torn places like Sarajevo, or so insists her sister Emily, who has bullied Bess into taking her along. Innocently the two women travel into the heart of a test site, part one of a crazed soldier and his band's plan to extort millions from the U.S.—or else everyone will meet the deadly fate of the villagers. As the plot frantically unfolds, Bess finds herself forced to trust a soldier of fortune who might have been responsible for sending Bess and Emily into danger in the first place. There's peril, romance, and suspense aplenty as the good guys race the clock to stop the villains.

Dick Francis's latest, **The 10 Lb. Penalty** (Putnam, \$24.95), serves up a likeable hero in the person of Benedict Juliard. We meet Ben on the awful day when the eighteen-year-old is fired as a stable jockey, his dreams of professional racing shattered. On that same day Ben is summoned by his father George, a self-made millionaire who dispatched his son to be raised by relatives after his wife died giving birth to their only child. George has his heart set on a political career, beginning with a campaign for an open seat in Parliament, and he wants his son by his side. Ben agrees to help. This novel spans five years; father and son grow to respect one another, and finally to love each other. Ben's quickness of mind saves George from two attempts on his life in that first election, while George rewards

Ben with a horse and professional training during Ben's college years. Meanwhile George's political acumen and spotless reputation not only put him in the spotlight, they also move him back into an assassin's sights. As always, Francis deftly fleshes out characters who elicit his reader's sympathies, offering peeks into the worlds of horses, insurance, even a Christmas party at 10 Downing Street.

I'm not convinced that anyone offers better one-liners than those delivered by Amanda Pepper, schoolteacher-cum-sleuth in Gillian Roberts' eight mysteries. **The Bluest Blood** (Ballantine, \$22) turns Amanda's wit and irony to book burners, with both hilarious and sobering effect. Neddy and Tea Roederer may be newcomers to Philadelphia's Main Line, but their extravagant lifestyle and generous donations to worthy causes have pushed them to the head of the class—of Philly philanthropists, at least. The Roederers' latest gift is to the library of the snooty prep school where Amanda teaches; it earns her an invitation to one of their posh parties. The gowns are splendid, the house is amazing, and the food is delicious; too bad that Amanda had to drive past a burning effigy of Neddy as she turned into the drive. It seems that the Moral Ecologists have now targeted the Roederers and Amanda's school's library in hopes of lighting a fire (a bonfire, actually) to ban such immoral books as *Huckleberry Finn*. Two of Amanda's students, best friends and computer junkies, appear to be involved when picketing turns to murder, which brings out Amanda's other persona—Amanda Pepper, Super Sleuth.

A new Adam Dalgliesh novel by P. D. James is an event, and **A Certain Justice** is worth the long wait (Knopf, \$25). As in James's recent books, Dalgliesh heads up a squad, rounded out by Detective Inspector Kate Miskin and a new man, a former theologian named Piers Tarrant. The team is called to Pawlet Court in the Middle Temple to investigate the brutal murder of a senior barrister in chambers. By the novel's end we know the victim and the victim's family; the hopeless, violent story of a young sociopath; the hopes, fears, and secrets of the victim's legal colleagues; and even the sad tale of the aftermath of a murder victim, the abrupt, irrevocable change wrought in one family. James questions a legal system that routinely protects the rights of the accused while ignoring the victim's, and in which defense barristers are intent on winning the accused his freedom without regard to justice. James has no easy answers, but she makes a compelling tale of the questions.

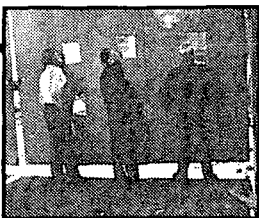
Julie Kaewert's **Unbound** (Bantam, \$5.99) is subtitled "A Book-lover's Mystery," and I can't quarrel with that. Alex Plumtree, son of

the founder and current publisher of London's small but prestigious Plumtree Press, is fairly excited about a new release, written by a friend. Angela Mayfield's book is a fact-based novel about Marcus Stonecypher, one of England's most popular novelists, long dead but still selling in his Plumtree editions. Rumors of the upcoming book have touched a nerve, however, and threats against it escalate to destroyed galleys—and then to more. There's lots of running around as Alex tries to reignite a romance, save Angela's book, and uncover a conspiracy of worldwide proportions, but most of that isn't nearly as much fun as the discussions of book collecting, the peeks at the legitimate rehabilitation of antique volumes and the tricks used by shysters, and attendance at an international rare book fair.

Ruth Rendell has added to her Chief Inspector Reg Wexford corpus with **Road Rage** (Crown, \$25); in it the stolid inspector faces a situation that should bring night terrors to any reader. Wexford's beloved town Kingsmarkham faces the threat of a huge new bypass. Protest committees have formed, and tree-huggers from around Britain have gathered. Wexford regrets the loss of the countryside, the wildlife, the peace and quiet, but his job is to maintain the peace. Then one morning five people leave their homes, climb into a taxi—and disappear. One of them was Dora Wexford, off to visit her daughter and new grandchild in London. The situation worsens when a demand is made: the construction of the bypass will be halted or the hostages won't be spared. Rendell shows us the agony of a strong, independent, professional cop who finds his world turned upside-down. How many families of victims has he had to console—and now his daughters are smothering him with solicitude. He must head up the squad to search for the kidnappers while ignoring the loneliness of not comfortably knowing where Dora is, the embarrassment of colleagues who find themselves working with the family member of a victim, the grief he's already feeling in anticipation that this may not end well. A keen, twisty police procedural that resonates with Wexford's own powerful emotional state.

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious won by Louie Bretz of Amarillo, Texas; Lyn Roberts of Colorado Springs, Colorado; Robert Kesling of Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; field, Missouri; R. Pat Bal-Walter Sands of Holiday Island, D. Smither of Beech Grove, Indiana; Bernice F. Weiss of Livingston, New Jersey; Gina Frye of Santa Cruz, California; and Daniel LeBoeuf of Springfield, Virginia.



Photograph contest was won by Louie Bretz of Amarillo, Texas. Honorable mentions go to Lyn Roberts of Colorado Springs, Colorado; Robert Kesling of Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; field, Missouri; R. Pat Bal-Walter Sands of Holiday Island, D. Smither of Beech Grove, Indiana; Bernice F. Weiss of Livingston, New Jersey; Gina Frye of Santa Cruz, California; and Daniel LeBoeuf of Springfield, Virginia.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

OCCUPATION by Louie Bretz

I know what they're thinking. Is he going to jump? I also know the answer to that one. No, he's not going to jump. He's a friend of mine. Partner, actually. This is the fifth time this week he's gone out on the ledge of the sixth floor of the building across the street and threatened suicide.

I've been coming by the parking garage now for about a month. I come every day at the same time. About the same time my partner across the street steps out onto the ledge.

Most of the people in the neighborhood don't even pay attention any more. He never does jump. However, the new customers who come to the garage don't know that, and I always call their attention to the jumper on the ledge across the street. It's one of the little unsavory quirks of human nature you can count on. They always watch. They wouldn't admit it, but why do they watch? I'll tell you why, they want to see him jump. It's like wide-eyed passersby at a bad automobile accident hoping to get a glimpse of a bloody, mangled body. You can count on it.

I'm done now. My partner will decide in a few minutes life may not be so hopeless after all and go back inside. The three gentlemen will be disappointed, but they won't admit it, they never do.

By the way, would you like to know what my occupation is? I sell hubcaps.

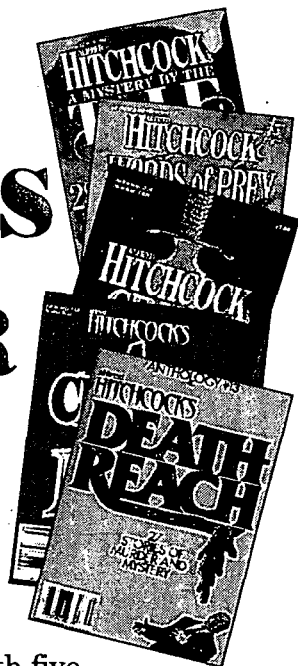
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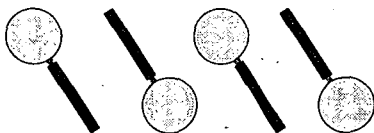
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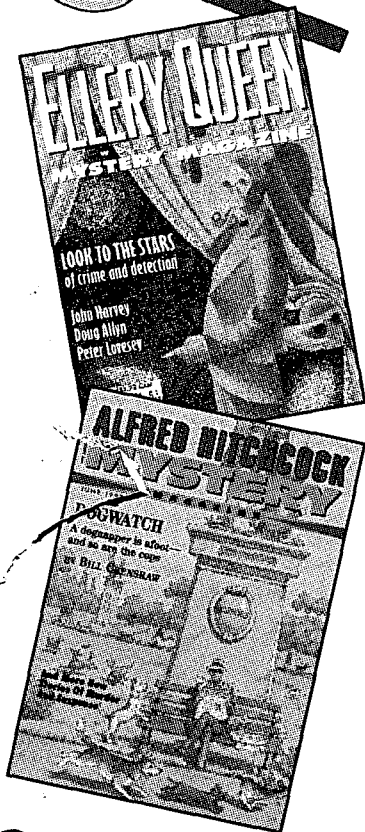
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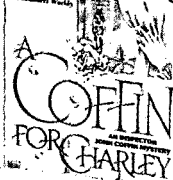
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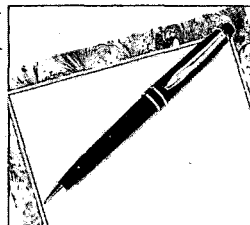
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